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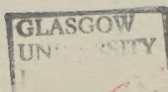
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WITHDRAWN

GEORGE GISSING

AN APPRECIATION

by

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PUBLICATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER
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TO
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

Preface

THIS little study of Gissing was begun in the University of Liverpool under the direction of Dr. John Sampson, to whose trenchant yet stimulating criticism it owes whatever freedom it may have from the grosser errors of taste and style. To him and to Professor Elton I feel sincere gratitude for unfailing inspiration and admonition, notably for the suggestion that I should submit the work to the Manchester University Press, where it was favourably received. Thus the child of one Northern University was adopted by another, and appears in public with the sanction of both ; for Dr. Herford himself kindly furthered my researches for the Introductory Chapter. It is fitting that a study of Gissing's work should be published by the Press of his old University. The curious may read for themselves his brilliant academic record in the *Owens College Magazine* for January 1904. His name has already been honoured by a memorial tablet in the main corridor of what was formerly the Arts Building, and by the foundation in 1914 of a "George Gissing Memorial Prize in English Literature." It is a joy to pay this further tribute to his memory.

The collection and selection of material for the first chapter was a difficult and delicate task. I should like to thank Sir Adolphus Ward, Sir Clement Shorter, Mr. Austin Harrison, and Mr. Edward Clodd for letters and suggestions which confirmed my tentative interpretation of Gissing's character from his works. Thanks are also due to the literary executors for permission to quote from certain of the published letters and novels, to Mr. Thomas

Seccombe for the dated list of books in the Bibliography, and to Mr. H. M. McKechnie, Secretary to the Manchester University Press, for professional advice and for meticulous care that the book should have whatever advantage might accrue from being worthily presented.

BANGOR, *September 1922.*

M. Y.

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GEORGE GISSING

George Gissing

Chapter I

Some Personal Characteristics

"THROUGHOUT the greater part of his life," says Mr. H. G. Wells, "Gissing was figured as the embodiment of nearly everything he most disliked." * It is the purpose of this chapter to attempt to correct misconceptions of Gissing's character and genius, and perchance to evoke a clearer conception of his personality and tastes. This may perhaps best be done by a reconsideration of existing criticism, by reference to his novels, and by the testimony of his friends.

In Gissing's case, as in many previous cases, the formal and authoritative records are the justest, though inaccurate in some minor details.† Mr. Thomas Seccombe gives

* *Monthly Review*, August 1904: "George Gissing: an Impression," by H. G. Wells. (The original preface to *Vera-nilda*.)

† *Dictionary of National Biography*, supp. 2, vol. ii: "George Gissing," by Thomas Seccombe. *The House of Cobwebs*, Preface by Thomas Seccombe. *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. xiii, ch. 14, by W. T. Young.

The inaccuracies are in the *Dictionary of National Biography* article: (a) Julian Casti is a character in *The Unclassed*, not in *Workers in the Dawn*. (b) In autumn 1897 Gissing went alone to Italy, not with Mr. H. G. Wells, whom he met in Rome. For account of departure see letter to Edward Clodd from Siena, November 6, 1897, in *Memories*. For meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Wells see *George Gissing: a Critical Study*, by Frank Swinnerton, p. 33.

a careful account of Gissing's parentage and of his father's influence, of his education and success at Owens College, Manchester ; of the abrupt ending of his college career, of his exile, and of his early unfortunate marriage. He traces his somewhat precarious existence during the years immediately preceding the publication of his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1882) ; after which, as Mr. Seccombe asserts, and as Mr. Austin Harrison confirms, Gissing, though never rich, was never in actual need.* Mr. Seccombe faithfully describes his devotion to the classics, his struggle for fame, his various travels and publications, and concludes with a notable paragraph, laying down the lines for future writers :

The intellectual beauty and sincere friendliness of Gissing's nature were obscured by a peculiar pride or sensitiveness. His idiosyncrasies wore down as he grew older, but he lost also his extraordinary power of intensifying the misery of the world's finer spirits who are thrown among "the herd that feed and breed" and are stupidly content. His prose style is scholarly, suave, subtle, and plastic. Critics have deemed him a classicist who missed his vocation, but few classicists have written so much or so well. His imperfect understanding of the *joie de vivre* reduced his public while he lived ; but there are signs that his work is obtaining a better co-ordinated appreciation since his death.

Unfortunately, succeeding writers have seized rather upon

* "In the bitter years of pursuit and attainment he wrought literally in solitude and alone. . . . The sickness of real poverty Gissing never knew after the year 1882, when his literary career in fact began."—Austin Harrison, in *The Nineteenth Century*, September 1906.

Mr. Seccombe's more vivid phrases, such as "amorous propensities led him into serious trouble" and "he showed a curious inability to do the sane, secure thing in ordinary affairs of life," and, by persistent and impertinent canvassing of his personal affairs, have evolved a "Gissing legend" which needs now to be discredited.

The Introductory Survey, also by Mr. Seccombe, prefixed to the collection of short stories entitled *The House of Cobwebs* shows Gissing as a scholarly recluse with a somewhat limited appeal as a novelist. This preface claims to be only "a chronological and, quite incidentally, a critical survey of George Gissing's chief works";* but Mr. Seccombe performs more than he promises and enriches his essay with comparative criticism; suggesting, for example, Gissing's affinity with Henri Murger in his treatment of *Thyrza*, and tracing the pedigree of the type of novel by which he is best known, from "Xavier de Maistre and St. Pierre to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*—nay, might one not almost say from the *pays du tendre* of *La Princesse de Clèves* itself?" Perhaps one of the most illuminating flashes in a study full of insight is the comparison of Gissing's descriptive art to the pastel drawing of Puvis de Chavannes. Truly there are the same qualities of restraint and subdued light in both, while

* Mr. Seccombe names as representative of Gissing's best work: *By the Ionian Sea*; *Charles Dickens*; *The Ryecroft Papers*; *New Grub Street*; *Thyrza*; *The Nether World*; and the short stories.

Born in Exile is not singled out for praise. Mr. Morley Roberts was one of the first to point out its merits in *The Albany*, Christmas 1904, and again in *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912), p. 307.

a "kind of mystic haze" hangs over Gissing's thought and expression, not only in *A Life's Morning*, where Mr. Seccombe finds it, but in many pages of the silver-grey, pellucid perfection of *The Ryecroft Papers*. In surveying the Gissing country Mr. Seccombe passes many of the novels in full review, notably *Thyrza* and *New Grub Street*. His criticism is seminal, and should have served to preclude the hasty dismissal of Gissing as a mere pessimist and realist.

Intellectually [he writes] his own life was, and continued to the last to be, romantic to an extent that few lives are.* Pessimistic he may at times appear, but this is almost entirely on the surface. For he was never in the least blasé or ennuyé. He had the pathetic treasure of the humble and downcast and unkindly entreated—unquenchable hope.

The late Lieut. W. T. Young shows Gissing as the novelist of a transition period, halting between Victorian sentiment and romance and the newer fashion of realism.† He notes with precision the resemblances between the English novelist and the various types of French realist, Zola and the brothers de Goncourt; and shows how the absence of didactic purpose in Gissing distinguishes his

* If Gissing's correspondence is, at length, collected and published it will illustrate this delight in intellectual adventure. With joy he writes home to Mr. Edward Clodd that he has now mastered Spanish and is able "to read *Don Quixote* in the original." November 1902.

Mr. Morley Roberts speaks of his zeal for languages and his working knowledge of Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and German. *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, p. 293.

† *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. xiii, ch. 14.

work from that of Dickens and Reade, even where all use similar material. Fresh from the study of two masters of modern fiction, Meredith and Samuel Butler, he hints that Gissing, too, is of his age in his preoccupation with the psychology of love. Having some definite, if academic, standard of taste and achievement, he is not beguiled into vague generalities, but puts his finger unerringly on Gissing's weaknesses when he writes: "We miss, however, Meredith's heroic key-note, poetic conception, and penumbra of comedy."

The biographers who come after Mr. Seccombe are in little danger of being preferred before him. "Unfortunate in his life, it seems as if Gissing were destined to be unfortunate in his death," writes a critic of *The Nation*, as he passes in review two studies of Gissing's life and work which appeared in 1912.* The one he dismisses and, on the whole, justly, as "the patronizing and unsavoury biography just published by Mr. Roberts under the thin disguise of fiction."† It is a book which

* *The Nation* (New York), March 13, 1913, on *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, by Morley Roberts; *George Gissing: a Critical Study*, by Frank Swinnerton.

† "For reasons which I cannot divine, and which have puzzled others, Mr. Roberts has altered the names of persons and places and the titles of Gissing's novels, with the result of some confusion to readers outside the circle of Gissing's intimates. They will not guess that Harold Edgeworth is Mr. Frederic Harrison, that by John Harley and the *Piccadilly Gazette* are meant John Morley and the *Pall Mall Gazette*; that John Glass is the late James Payn; G. H. Rivers, Mr. H. G. Wells; Edward Latter, Mr. Clement Shorter; nor will they easily identify me under the guise of Edmund Roden."—*Memories*, by Edward Clodd, p. 165.

gave little satisfaction to Gissing's friends. A plain title, a straightforward use of names, and an adequate index would have compensated for the omission of pathological detail the accuracy of which is not incontestable. Moreover, such detail contributes nothing to the appreciation of Gissing as a man of letters, in which character alone he belongs to the student or to the world at large. Mr. Morley Roberts was more just to his friend in an earlier article, "The Exile of George Gissing." * The difficulty is that, having the authority of personal testimony, for Mr. Roberts was Gissing's earliest friend, his writings have been used as a kind of source-book by succeeding writers and his phrases twisted from their original meaning. For instance, Mr. Roberts speaks of Gissing as an "inverted idealist," Mr. Swinnerton "goes one better" and writes of his "inverted sentimentality." Such phrases do but darken counsel. The original epithet is not a particularly happy one, indeed, as it stands, and without context it means, if it mean anything, a satirist with an ideal (like Swift), which Gissing lacked the virility to become. But in its context, from which critics have carefully detached it to use it to mean "a pessimist," the phrase had quite a different shade of meaning, for Mr. Roberts was writing of Gissing's taste for the classics and his distaste for modern enquiry when he called him "an inverted idealist" and "a man whose future was in the past." † Gissing himself would have admitted that his touchstone of intellectual values was in the past. But intellect is not all ; his emotional ideals are another and a

* *The Albany*, Christmas 1904.

† *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, pp. 115 and 133.

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subtler matter, and, as they suffuse all his writings, it is well to remember that there is no "inverted" idealism here. When idealism is charged with emotion suffering is often keen and permanent, because the more faithful one is to the ideal love, the less does the actual love content one. It is unintelligent to call either Gissing or those characters whom he created in his own image abnormal or unique in temperament and disposition because of the emotional frustration of their lives ; though one does feel inclined, at times, to admonish them in the words of Christina Rossetti :

Alas, thou foolish one ! alike unfit
For healthy joy and salutary pain :
Thou knowest the chase useless, and again
Turnest to follow it !

These personages were extraordinarily unlucky in their love affairs, but their pathetic treasure of hopefulness and their undimmed enthusiasm and reverence for women (which was, at length, rewarded in Gissing's own case) simply exemplify in a marked degree that forward-looking idealism of the world's finer spirits which it would be impertinent to call abnormal or unique.* That this quality is so often allied, or perhaps one might say alloyed, with instability of purpose, as in an ardent spirit like Shelley, or in the introspective artist-hero of Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*, is evident, but inexplicable, even to the

* Another facet of the "faith unfaithful" of the idealist is to be found in Dowson's poem with its haunting refrain : "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara ! in my fashion." Here, in truth, there is "inverted" or reverted idealism.

newest psychologist. In contemplation of facts like this, one can only echo Porson and "damn the nature of things." Still, the appreciation of such complexities of character gives one the right to protest, and to protest strongly, against Mr. Swinnerton's appraisal of Gissing's characters as abnormal.* They are not, certainly, characters of universal interest, but they are, we think, too typical of modern civilization to be dismissed as abnormal; which is, moreover, to belittle them as works of art. They are often frustrated, just as Gissing was often frustrated, but the frustration of their lives has been over-emphasized. Idealists are for ever doomed to disappointment in a greater or less degree, according to the quality of their aspirations, though they may progress far in pursuit of the unattainable as Gissing himself undoubtedly did. His own reactions against the thwacks and thwartings of fate were much more vigorous than those of his characters. Anguish made him an artist. There is nothing abnormal in that. Is not creative art very often the direct outcome or expression of emotional frustration?† Should we have had *The Divine Comedy* without Dante's

* . . . "His best books are studies of abnormal temperament," p. 15. . . . "It is among the studies of abnormal temperament that his most notable successes are to be found," p. 45. Mr. Swinnerton dismisses the idea that Gissing is a realist on the grounds that "realism is largely concerned with normality," p. 82. He is more precise in describing *Born in Exile* as "a copious study of a small number of unusual people," p. 92.

† An excellent psychological analysis of the creative act in art is to be found in *Beauty and the Beast: an Essay in Evolutionary Aesthetic*, by Stewart A. McDowall (1921), to which I am indebted here.

love and exile, or Michael Angelo's mighty work without his erotic distress? Or, to recall again Hardy's Jocelyn Pierston, a figure of Gissing's own time and scale, would he have become a true artist had the course of his love run smooth? Hardy thinks not, for he writes: "frustration and elusiveness of desire made him great in Art." So it is with Gissing, who converts his "gyves into graces" and makes copy of his very griefs. In quite an early novel he writes: "The artist *ought* to be able to make material of his own sufferings, even while the suffering is at its height."

Moreover, one cannot judge literature merely by its content, and Mr. Swinnerton seems singularly unaware of Gissing's "well of English undefiled." Even *The Ryecroft Papers* he dismisses with faint praise as "really honest, clear writing, with a natural grace. The style is far from that of *Demos* and *Born in Exile*, but has a lightness and apparent ease that is pleasant to the literary palate." A vastly different appreciation of Gissing's art by a contemporary critic had appeared in the very year in which he died: "The point is not, as *The Athenæum* suggested, how it was possible for the novelist who wrote *Demos* and *The Unclassed* to write these later works, but rather how difficult it must have been for a man with such scholarly and literary tendencies to write anything at all in the circumstances which surrounded the early life of Mr. G. Gissing." In this appreciation of *The Ryecroft Papers* Mr. W. L. Courtney pays tribute by catching the very note of the author's style:

All the fretful fever of politics and of national expansion, the tyranny of the scientific age, the slowly-evolving forces which

make for democracy or possibly socialism, are for him as though they had no existence. . . . The heathen may rage and the nations desire a vain thing, but it concerns him not. . . . He is happy in his wide independence and solitude ; free from ambition and care. But because he is entirely amiable and tender-hearted I think he is a little sorry for those who have to bear the labour and heat of the day ; and his pity is fortunately devoid of condescension.*

Gissing certainly did serve a stern apprenticeship to letters. After his temporary sojourn in America and Germany he returned in 1878 to London, where, in poverty and loneliness, he wrote literally for his daily bread :

I see that alley hidden on the west side of Tottenham Court Road where, after living in a back bedroom on the top-floor, I had to exchange for the front cellar : there was a difference, if I remember rightly, of sixpence a week, and sixpence, in those days, was a very great consideration—why, it meant a couple of meals! . . . The front cellar was stone-floored: its furniture was a table, a chair, a washstand, and a bed ; the window, which, of course had never been cleaned since it was put in, received light through a flat grating in the alley above. Here I lived ; here I *wrote*. Yes, “ literary work ” was done at that filthy deal table on which, by the bye, lay my Homer, my Shakespeare, and the few other books I then possessed.†

But this was only while he was writing his first novel, in which, as Mr. Austin Harrison points out,‡ there is a

* *English Illustrated Magazine*, November 1903.

† *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 29 (Constable, 1914).

‡ *Nineteenth Century*, September 1906.

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conscious autobiographical portrait of himself, in the person of Arthur Golding :

His eyes were of light blue, his nose was of a Grecian type, his lips and chin were moulded in form expressive of extreme sensibility and gentleness of disposition, showing traces, moreover, of instability in moral character . . . a sad, pathetic face ; in repose a look of ineffable dreariness, sorrow, and affliction ; yet flashes and bursts of uproarious laughter.

Arthur Golding is the first of those dubitative characters, rich in confessional interest, with whom Gissing is continually preoccupied. All the characters in this book reflect the inner discords and contemporary mental conflicts of the author. Moreover, that beautiful, rhythmical style to which Mr. Seccombe bears testimony, and which is, perhaps, Gissing's abiding claim to fame, is already foreshadowed when he describes "an enthusiasm which set at defiance the weariness of nature and made night tributary to the supply of hours, of which day had too few." * Mr. Frederic Harrison recognized the quality of this early book and appointed Gissing as tutor to his sons ; Mr. (now Lord) Morley encouraged him to contribute to the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

Though he rejoiced in the financial security it afforded, tutorial work did not greatly attract him, as readers of *The Unclassed* and *Topham's Chance* will understand. Yet he had many of the qualities of a successful teacher, and Mr. Austin Harrison bears affectionate witness to his zeal in inspiring his pupils with a love of learning and an appreciation of the fine arts, especially music and drawing.

* *Workers in the Dawn*, p. 238 (Remington and Co., London, 1880).

His sketch, moreover, gives an impression of greater joy and virility than is usually associated with Gissing, who, it seems, delighted to run and climb with his pupils on holiday in the Lake District. Musing, possibly, upon these earlier days, Gissing writes in *The Ryecroft Papers*: "I know only one way in which I could have played a meritorious part as an active citizen: by becoming a schoolmaster in some little country town and teaching half a dozen teachable boys to love study for its own sake. That I could have done, I dare say."* Mr. Austin Harrison's judgement would go far to confirm this opinion of Gissing's abilities, though he would prefer him to a higher rank of the service:

Gissing was an artist; a contemplative individualist; a man influenced by the mood of the sky, the procession of the year, by circumstance and environment. . . . By nature he was made for the life of tranquillity and meditation, for cultured leisure and repose. . . . In other circumstances he might have been a university don, a famous scholar, have amassed learning and fame. . . . A library was to him a garden of roses; he loved books as women love flowers—emotionally, instinctively. He had a Grecian love for all beauty.†

It is, perhaps, idle to speculate further where all hangs on the magic words "in other circumstances." Let Gissing himself voice the final reflection: "Yet, no; for I must have had as a young man the same mind that I have in age, devoid of idle ambitions, undisturbed by unattainable ideals."‡

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 288.

† *Nineteenth Century*, September 1906.

‡ *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 288.

Nor was journalism more likely to attract a man who had in him the makings of a fine classical scholar. For one thing, he was far too scrupulous a writer. His letters to Mr. (now Sir) C. K. Shorter* during the years in which he was writing short stories for *The Sphere* and *The English Illustrated Magazine* reflect the meticulous care with which Gissing corrected and re-corrected his proofs; his anxious ignorance of journalistic procedure and the niceties of copyright; his proud distaste of "being forced to make commerce of one's art." In 1900, Mr. Shorter evidently suggested that Gissing should do a Paris letter for one of his publications, but Gissing pleads pre-occupation with fiction, adding, "I fear I must not undertake what I could not creditably perform." This, too, is the abiding impression his character has left on the writer of *The Times* obituary notice, December 29, 1903, who hails him as a writer "who valued his artistic conscience above popularity, and his purpose above his immediate reward." This is not the common temper of a journalist. By the time he had satisfied himself that his work was sufficiently polished for publication the occasion for it would have passed. Passage after passage of *New Grub Street* reflects this exacting, artistic conscience: "And yet . . . of course, it isn't only for the sake of reputation that one tries to do uncommon work. There's the shrinking from conscious insincerity of workmanship, which most of the writers nowadays seem never to feel. 'It's good enough for the market!'—that satisfies them.

* Privately printed; accessible in British Museum, s.v. *Letters to an Editor*.

And perhaps they are justified." * The whole novel is, though it is much more than that, an indictment of the commercialization of journalism, the turning of an art into a trade ; a tendency which Gissing never ceased to deplore.†

Gissing's work was never topical, and is the more likely to last for that reason. Later critics may come to regard him not only as an artist but also as a social historian, though his social preoccupations are purely literary. Current events, whether national or political, are little noticed in his pages. *In the Year of Jubilee*, for example, which an astute writer would have published in 1887, or held over till 1897, appeared in 1894, while it was by luck rather than by cunning that *Demos: a Story of English Socialism*, happened to please the popular taste by appearing in 1886, a year marked by political and social unrest. One wonders if Mr. J. D. Beresford's *Revolution* (1921) will score a similar success. The fact is that bondage of any kind was peculiarly irksome to Gissing. He could not or would not write to order ; he must be free, if only free to starve. How should a man whose whole being was irradiated with the abiding beauty of classical life and literature pay attention to the trivialities and impertinences of "the latest movement but one" ?

This love of the classics tinges all his writing ; it inspires his early prize poem *Ravenna* (1874), and prompts his posthumous novel *Veranilda* (1904). It is incarnate in the person of Julian Casti, with his love of Gibbon and

* *New Grub Street*, p. 45 (Smith, Elder and Co., 1908).

† Cf. *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 5.

his literary projects concerning Stilicho and Alaric.* Alaric reappears as the subject of Earwaker's prize poem in *Born in Exile*; and again, in happier surroundings, in *By the Ionian Sea*. The "chimney-piece supported by caryatides" in *Isabel Clarendon* bears silent witness to a constant enthusiasm which alike suggests the Italian background of *The Emancipated* and the beautiful Greek setting of *Sleeping Fires*. It was to Italy rather than to Greece that Gissing owed allegiance. One of Julian Casti's speeches voices his early ambition to visit that scene of former splendours: "I think most of classical Italy. I am no scholar, but I love the Latin writers and can forget myself for hours working through Livy or Tacitus. I want to see the ruins of Rome; I want to see the Tiber, the Clitumnus, the Aufidus, the Alban Hills, Lake Trasimenus—a thousand places!" To a man of such a temperament ordinary journalism was impossible. Moreover, his proud refusal to debase his art or to soil his artistic conscience entitled him to weight with scorn the blows he dealt to popular, and more especially political, journalism in his novels, to which we must now turn for closer consideration of his tastes.

When Gissing was born the three-volume novel was at its height, and serial publication the rule rather than the exception. In his youth Dickens and Thackeray were still publishing their works in monthly parts, while Trollope had just made good with the first of the *Barchester* series. It is no uncommon feat for such masters of fiction to manipulate the lives of some thirty or forty people throughout eight or nine hundred pages, con-

* *The Unclassed* (Lawrence and Bullen, 1895).

ducting some with decent sorrow to the grave and others with equal decorum to the altar. The novel still had a beginning, middle, and end in the days of Gissing's youth.* He himself used the old three-volume form of the novel as late as 1892, though by this time the chart was lost which "steered the old three-decker to the Islands of the Blest." From the first he showed that marked power of analysing motive and feeling which tends to limit the number of characters created, and, in many cases, to reduce the scale of the novel.

Amidst much that is inconclusive and variable, much that may be interpreted as dramatic rather than personal opinion, there may be traced throughout the novels a fairly consistent attitude to life. The author's beliefs hang well together: he loved the classics; believed in aristocracy; had hopes of education; despised politics; distrusted the press; hated modern civilization; and loathed industrialism, with its logical outcome, war. Those who are wise after the event will find much to give them pause in Gissing's many prophecies of international conflict.†

The natural bent of Gissing's mind was certainly aristocratic, and the course of his life confirmed it. He passed impressionable years amidst squalor and domestic misery, constantly retreating in self-defence to that inner sanctuary of mind and memory where Greek and Roman

* An American critic points out that there are 350 characters in *Pickwick*.

† *The Crown of Life*, pp. 51 and 52: *Ibid.*, pp. 176 *et seq.* (Methuen, 1899). *The Whirlpool*, *passim* (Lawrence and Bullen, 1897). *Ryecroft Papers*, *passim*.

polity prevailed. His innate distaste for democracy was thus strengthened, so that he eventually arrived at a frame of mind combining contempt for popular life and opinion with an almost absurd veneration for scholarship and refinement. His Godwin Peak shows this attitude most clearly, but even from the lips of the gentle Ryecroft come outbursts such as these : " I am no friend of the people. . . . Every instinct of my being is anti-democratic, and I dread to think of what an England may become when Demos rules irresistibly." *

Yet, despite his reverence for books and learning, his nearly enthusiasm for education was tempered by experience and observation. The quixotic schemes for establishing Lectures and Reading-rooms for working-men which are suggested in *Workers in the Dawn*, and which form part of the story in *Thyrza*, no longer attract the later Gissing. Palliatives seem to him useless ; he notes with distrust the experiments and changes in the educational world :

The old classical education was fairly consistent, but it exists no longer. Nothing has taken its place. Muddle, experiment, and waste of lives—too awful to think about. . . . Somebody said to me once : " Well, but look at the results ; they're not so bad ! " Great heavens ! not so bad—when the supreme concern of mankind is to perfect their instruments of slaughter ! Not so bad—when the gaol and the gallows are taken as a matter of course ! Not so bad—when huge, filthy cities are packed with multitudes who have no escape from toil and hunger but in a wretched death ! Not so bad—when all but every man's life is one long blunder, the result of ignorance and unruled passions. †

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 47.

† *The Whirlpool*, p. 391.

Gissing would almost certainly have condemned the modern movement towards compulsory higher education. We shall not progress by turning "the hungry sheep" of yesterday into "the maw-crammed beasts" of to-morrow. The best traditions are against such procedure; there is a Scriptural warning of the futility of casting pearls before swine. Again and again Gissing labours this point, going yet further and urging that the indiscriminate education even of the educable working-classes is no true kindness, and pleading that the rural workers, at any rate, may long be preserved from "the half-knowledge that turns life sour." He declares that "to the relatively poor (who are so much worse off than the poor absolutely) education is in most cases a mocking cruelty." * He is full of indignant pity for "the class created by the mania for education, which consists of those unhappy men and women whom unspeakable cruelty endows with intellectual needs whilst refusing them the sustenance they are taught to crave."† Probably this class is less numerous than Gissing supposed; in any case, discontent is a necessary spur to endeavour. The Greek ideal would have bestowed higher education upon the few, though without distinction of sex, and Gissing seems to have shared Plato's opinion that the untrained intelligence of women ensures a ceaseless succession of fools. He does not spare the lath-and-plaster erection disguised by a showy stucco of accomplishments which, until recent years, has done duty for the education of women. The Denyer family abroad, fluently inaccurate in several languages, or the French family in

* *New Grub Street*, p. 33.

† *Thyrza*, p. 14 (Smith, Elder and Co., 1907).

suburban London, sufficiently indicate Gissing's opinion on this point. The Misses French "*knew* French"—"*had done* Political Economy"—"*had been through* Inorganic Chemistry and Botany." Gissing's irony is, partly, directed here against the deplorable abuse of English in current educational terms and the folly of an examination system for which students are crammed like Strasbourg geese. Thus he describes "Jessica Morgan, who talked only of the 'exam,' of her chances in this or that 'paper,' of the likelihood that this or the other question would be 'set' . . . who went to bed with a manual, and got up with a compendium."*

"When women are educated they will take the world as it is and decline to live on illusions"; such is Gissing's constantly recurring hope. Here, as everywhere, his attitude is conditioned by his idealism; he believes what he hopes. He needs reminding that education, to adapt his own words, "can do no more for a woman than make unshadowed revelation of such aspiring faculty as she is endowed withal. It cannot supply her with a force greater than she is born to." Yet he is one of the few novelists with any open vision of the harmonious development of women, who, in increasing numbers, attempt to steer a middle course between the Scylla of domestic drudgery and the Charybdis of academic preoccupation:

There are who suspect that our servant question foretells a radical change in ways of thinking about the life of home; that the lady of a hundred years hence will be much more competent and active in cares domestic than the average shop-keeper's wife to-day; that it may not be found impossible to

* *In the Year of Jubilee*, p. 7 (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1911).

turn from a page of Sophocles to the boiling of a potato, or even the scrubbing of a floor.*

“ I detest the very name of Parliament, and could as soon read Todhunter on Conic Sections as the reports of a debate,” says Osmond Waymark in *The Unclassed*.† The sentiment is Gissing’s own. He wrote three novels which might, by courtesy, be called political, but the interest is always psychological rather than political. *Demos* is a description of the practice rather than the theory of Socialism. It illustrates the effect of suddenly acquired wealth on character, and shows the futility of vague, indefinite idealisms. *Denzil Quarrier* is an exceedingly painful and not altogether convincing story of a friend’s treachery ; the political contest, for all its amusing by-play, is the merest machinery for creating a critical situation of the “ improbable possible ” type. In *Our Friend the Charlatan*, the hero, Dyce Lashmar, is simply a plausible mountebank casually attracted to politics as an easy means of subsistence. He is a Mr. Facing-Both-Ways in politics, as in love. In the same galley, though disguised as a clergyman, is the Rev. Bruno Chilvers, of *Born in Exile*. Breakspeare, the editor of the Liberal paper, the only real politician in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, might well have appeared in Mark Rutherford’s pages ; it is he who voices Gissing’s contempt for the press. If Gissing dips his pen in disdain when he seeks to portray a politician,‡ his ink has an unwonted propor-

* *Critical Study of Charles Dickens*, p. 192 (Gresham Publishing Company).

† Page 43.

‡ E.g. Mr. James Dalmaine, M.P. (*Thyrza*) ; Mr. Arnold Jacks, M.P. (*The Crown of Life*).

tion of gall when he writes about the influence of the press.

The newspaper is the very voice of all that is worst in our civilization. If ever there is in one column a pretence of higher teaching it is made laughable by the base tendency of all the rest. The newspaper has supplanted the book; every gross-minded scribbler who gets a square inch of space in the morning journal has a more respectful hearing than Shakespeare. These writers are tradesmen, and with all their power they cry up the spirit of trade. Till the influence of the newspaper declines . . . our state will grow worse.*

In his descriptions of the Barmbys, father and son, Gissing comes within hailing distance of humour. They are classed for all time by their attitude to the daily press. Mr. Barmby senior was much given to writing to the papers.

He never signed such letters with his own name, but chose a pseudonym befitting his subject. Thus, if moved to civic indignation by pieces of orange-peel on the pavement, he styled himself "Urban Rambler"; if anxious to protest against the overcrowding of 'bus or railway carriage, his signature was "Otium cum Dignitate"; . . . His public epistles, if collected, would have made an entertaining and instructive volume, so admirably did they represent one phase of the popular mind. "No, sir"—this sentence frequently occurred—"it was not thus that our fathers achieved national and civic greatness!" And again: "All the feelings of an English parent revolt, etc.," or—"And now, sir, where is this to end?"—a phrase applied at one moment to the prospects of religion and morality, at another to the multiplication of muffin-bells.†

We have all met Mr. Barmby senior! His son has very largely educated himself by the "busy perusal of penny

* *Thyrza*, p. 93. † *In the Year of Jubilee*, p. 213.

popularities," until he is all but incapable of sustained attention. It is of him and of his kind that Gissing is thinking when he makes Whelpdale re-model an old periodical, *Chat*, on modern lines under the title *Chit-Chat*.

Let me explain my principle. I would have the paper address itself to the quarter-educated : that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools—the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention. . . . Everything must be very short, two inches at the utmost ; their attention can't sustain itself beyond two inches. Even chat is too solid for them ; they want chit-chat.*

In *Born in Exile* there is an absolutely faithful study of an adolescent "moulded in common clay" who numbers amongst his more intellectual pursuits a fondness for newspaper competitions,† of which Gissing gives a scathing description in *The Town Traveller*.‡ To tell the truth, almost all popular amusements offend his taste ; he has little or no sympathy with the crowd at play. It would be inconsistent with his attitude towards life. "Life, to be worthy the name, must be first and foremost concerned with the things of the heart and mind. Yet everything in our time favours the opposite. . . . Our social state, in short, has converted the means of life into its end."§ This, then, is Gissing's indictment of modern civilization, in which he finds little to approve. It is, in particular, the strenuousness of modern life that he objects to, hardly realizing that there may be other, and yet worthy, ways of enjoying existence than his own, *in angulo cum libro*.

* *New Grub Street*, p. 419.

† *Born in Exile*, pp. 69–70 (Nelson's Shilling Library).

‡ Page 288. § *Thyrza*, p. 92.

SOME PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS 23

He has an unhappy faculty for emphasizing the dark spots of industrialism. If, for example, he needs to associate a trade with one of his characters he specifies an ignoble one; he makes Gilbert Grail an operative in a tallow-factory, and Henry Mutimer a clerk in a drain-pipe manufactory. The contemptuous description of the Acropolis of Birmingham in *Eve's Ransom*; the scanty account of Manchester seen through a drizzle of rain in *Born in Exile*; the sneer at South Lancashire and our "modern pre-eminence in the creation of ugliness" in *The Ryecroft Papers*; the absolute insignificance of commerce in his novel-world, sufficiently indicate his distaste for the "swarm areas" of industrialism. Godwin Peak's attitude to the vulgar and tactless uncle who would open "Peak's Dining and Refreshment Rooms" directly opposite the college where his nephew was a student, strikes a North-country reader as hypersensitive and unconvincing. Such connections are too common in industrial areas to excite the attention Gissing seems to think they deserve.

Part of his hatred of industrialism sprang from his constant longing for calm and peace. The commercial world appeared to him little else than a battlefield; he could not conceive of men shouting and exulting in the fray. There is, in *The Crown of Life*, a merchant rejoicing in the name of Moncharmout, who, it would seem, is Gissing's ideal of a business man: "He sees commerce from the human point of view, not as the brutal pitiless struggle which justifies every form of ferocity and low cunning. I never knew him utter an ignoble thought about trade and money-making. . . . He

is a lesson in civilization. If trade is not to put an end to human progress it must be pursued in Moncharmont's spirit." * One shrewdly suspects that in real life Moncharmont would be forced to file his petition at no distant date, though he is interesting enough as a merchant in a book.

To Gissing the connection between competitive industry and war seems to have been abundantly clear. All the advances of scientific invention on which we pride ourselves seemed to him only to make international strife more terribly and more immediately possible. The acceleration of transport, for example, brings forth this comment: "By approximation, all countries have entered the sphere of natural quarrel." † He had a lively and abiding sense of the difficulties of human intercourse. "How, then," he cries in effect, "if it is impossible for any two people to associate even transitorily without mutual offence shall it be possible for two nations whose peoples are racially and temperamentally different to agree?" Jerome Otway's *Historical Fragment*, ‡ an excellent example of the light, ironical vein in which the mature Gissing delighted, is concerned with the underlying causes of war between two imaginary Asiatic kingdoms. The press, as usual, comes in for responsibility, which it shares with experimental science. A public official in Kalaya, whose duty it was to convey news to the community by means of a primitive system of manuscript placarding, hit upon a mechanical device whereby news-sheets could be rapidly multiplied and sold. About

* *The Crown of Life*, p. 156. † *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 95.

‡ *The Crown of Life*, pp. 176 *et seq.*

the same time a general in Duroba discovered a new and terrible explosive which he adapted for use in warfare. What else could follow? Each sought occasion to prove his invention, with the result that their kingdoms declared war. The sequel is better than could have been hoped for, and is one of the most humorous things Gissing ever wrote; the Duroban general blows himself to bits with his new explosive, while the Kalayan publicist becomes imbecile and passes away.

In sober earnest, though, Gissing prophesied the South African War in *The Whirlpool* (1897). The passage demands quotation in full. Harvey Rolfe and Hugh Carnaby are declaiming against modern civilization and the limitations which it imposes on man, when Rolfe breaks out:

There's more than that to do in South Africa. . . . Who believes for a moment that England will remain satisfied with bits here and there? We have to swallow the whole, of course. We shall go on fighting and annexing until—until the decline and fall of the British Empire. That hasn't begun yet. Some of us are so over-civilized that it makes a reaction of wholesome barbarism in the rest. We shall fight like blazes in the twentieth century. It's the only thing that keeps Englishmen sound—commercialism is their curse. Happily, no sooner do they get fat than they kick, and somebody's shin suffers: then they fight off the excessive flesh. War is England's Banting! *

And in *The Ryecroft Papers* he puts his finger on what may be a root cause for eventual estrangement between this country and America when he protests that, though democracy may be indigenous to America it is a growth

* *The Whirlpool*, p. 17.

alien to our soil, which has nourished generation after generation of believers in hereditary lordship.

As regards religion, Gissing was born into a Laodicean age and grew to maturity in a generation which reluctantly and somewhat hazily compromised with the Darwinian theory, seeking only to prove "that *The Origin of Species* was approvingly foreseen in the first chapter of Genesis, and that the Apostles' Creed conflicts in no single point with the latest results of Biblical criticism."* This is the kind of intellectual dishonesty which Gissing detests. He is in much the same position theologically as Samuel Butler, though he is not nearly so well satisfied with it, or with himself; nor is there anything in his studies of religious temperament so trenchant as the whole-hearted travesties in *The Way of All Flesh*. Take as a touchstone the passage where Ernest debates within himself whether, as a Christian, he ought to smoke, fearing that, if tobacco had been known to St. Paul, he would have condemned it in good round terms; yet hoping that perhaps God foresaw Paul's emphatic prohibition and therefore deferred the discovery of tobacco to a safer date.† Gissing's theology is wire-drawn in comparison; and he died before medicine began to usurp the healing office of the Church and to offer psycho-analysis as a substitute for confession. But the movement would not have attracted him. Already in his day society was enthralled by esoteric Buddhism, by table-turning and spirit-rapping; and he has his little jibe at the "long procession of words in limping Greek—a little difficult till practice had made perfect" which delighted the fashionable children of his own day.

* *Born in Exile*, p. 127. † *The Way of All Flesh*, ch. 50.

And yet his letters and his books show him continually preoccupied with philosophic thought. He is exquisitely sensible to beauty ; he feels awe, wonder, self-abasement. The scanty record we have of his life shows him practised in aspirations and beliefs which he hesitated to profess, though his best friend is at pains to clear his memory of the suspicion that he died a Christian.* Let Gissing himself have the final word, in a strain familiar to readers of his most popular book. The quotation is from a letter to Mr. Edward Clodd, and the subject of discussion has been Wells's lecture to the Royal Institution (evidently on the " Idea of God "). Here is his own statement of his position :

That there is some order, some purpose, seems a certainty ; my mind, at all events, refuses to grasp the idea of a universe which means nothing at all. But just as unable am I to accept any of the solutions ever proposed. Above all, it is the existence of natural beauty which haunts my thought. I can, for a time, forget the world's horrors. I can never forget the flower by the wayside and the sun falling in the west. These things have a meaning—but I doubt, I doubt, whether the mind of man will ever be permitted to know it.†

The isolation of Gissing's life has been over-emphasized. In his earlier days he absolutely needed seclusion for his work, but even then his friendship with the Harrisons would link him, however lightly, with the literary world, and this friendship demonstrably leavened his loneliest years from 1882-1890. Mr. Austin Harrison was his

* Mr. Morley Roberts in *The Westminster Gazette*, January 11, 1904.

† March 1, 1902. Cf. *Ryecroft Papers*, ch. 9 and 10.

life-long friend, and so also were Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Wells, and, though less familiarly, Mr. Edward Clodd and Mr. (now Sir) C. K. Shorter. Mr. Austin Harrison's article in *The Nineteenth Century** gives intimate personal details of Gissing's tastes and disposition: "of his life-long and passionate instinct of revolt; his reverential love for music; his fondness for cats; his hatred of sport, particularly of hunting and killing." Mr. Wells describes him as he appeared in his enthusiastic twenties: "a tall, spare, vigorous figure, full of rich possibilities," fired with admiring zeal for Balzac, and setting himself, more or less deliberately, to "the scheme of an English Comédie Humaine." . . . "He had quite definitely a presence. His voice was round and full, and a youth in which books had overtopped exercise had made his diction more bookish and rotund than is common."† During the eighteen-nineties he must have made friends and acquaintances in the literary world, from whom there were kindly tributes to his memory after his death.‡ From *Letters to Edward Clodd* (1895-1905) it is clear that he was a member of the Omar Khayyam Club, and on friendly terms with George Meredith, who gave him literary counsel and, incidentally, warned him of the probable failure of *Veranilda*. He also knew and loved Grant Allen, and had some acquaintance with Marion Crawford, whom he hoped to meet in Naples (1897). Mr. Shorter recalls him with affection as "a pure-souled, high-minded man, with a fine zest for all that is best in life . . . a gentleman in

* September 1906. † *Monthly Review*, August 1904.

‡ E.g. *The Academy*, January 9, 1904; *Athenæum*, January 2 and 16, 1904; *The Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1906.

the finest acceptance of the term." * In the Literary Letter of *The Sphere*, Jan. 1904, he speaks of "the infinite possibilities of happiness in his nature," and specifically states that "he was appreciated by Meredith, Hardy, and Barrie." The fact that Gissing elected to live abroad after 1897, just when he was really becoming known, has given a stronger impression of seclusion and exclusiveness than enquiry will substantiate. Though he lived abroad, his spirit brooded over literary London. Nor was his genius unrecognized by contemporary men of letters. Henry James professes a "persistent taste for Gissing" and admires his "individual, manly strain." He finds him faulty in "distribution and composition . . . unable always to sustain the illusion of the passage of time," yet he generously acclaims him "*the* authority in fact on a region vast and unexplored." † Mr. Arnold Bennett writes of him "as an explorer of hidden and recondite beauty in unsuspected places. . . . There is the beauty of light and joy and strength exulting ; but there is, also, the beauty of shade, of sorrow and sadness, and of humility oppressed." ‡ This latter beauty he finds in Gissing, especially in *The Nether World*, which he considers his most characteristic book. The whole article is interesting, though the critic finds Gissing a good deal more Olympian than he really was. The posthumous criticisms have been "many, but not much" ; the Rt.

* "A Note on George Gissing," printed at end of *Letters to an Editor*.

† *Notes on Novelists*, s.v. London Notes, p. 346.

‡ *Fame and Fiction : an Enquiry into Certain Popularities* (Grant Richards, 1901).

Hon. C. F. G. Masterman enters a wistful protest that Gissing's happier years should have ended so soon,* while Mr. A. C. Benson, himself half-brother to Henry Ryecroft, on the intellectual though not on the spiritual side, pays Gissing a brief tribute in the *Upton Letters* (1905). There is much in W. N. P. Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man* to recall Gissing's heroes, with their intense, internal life and cribb'd and cabin'd circumstances. One entry records the successful appeal of the novelist to a kindred spirit: "Read George Gissing's novel, *Born in Exile*. Godwin Peak, with his intense pride of individuality, self-torturing capacities, and sentimental languishment, reminds me of myself." †

From the few published letters it would appear that Gissing was singularly free from professional jealousy, a conclusion which is borne out by his generous praise of Mr. H. G. Wells in *The Ryecroft Papers*.‡ Writing from St. Jean de Luz in 1902, he waxes enthusiastic over Joseph Conrad's *Youth*. "No man at present writing fiction has such grip of reality, such imaginative vigour, and such wonderful command of language. . . . I think him a *great* writer—there's no other word." In view of this criticism it is curious to reflect that Edwin Björkman, in his essay on the *New Spirit in Literature*, should couple Gissing and Conrad together in an appreciation which contains a valuable and suggestive comparison between Gissing and Strindberg.§

* *In Peril of Change* (1905), pp. 68-73. † Page 32.

‡ Ch. 23. A Visit from N——.

§ *Voices of To-morrow* (1913).

Chapter II

The Setting of the Novels

GISSING had few of the qualifications of a successful Londoner ; he lacked money and made few friends ; he shrank from casual acquaintances and formed few local attachments ; he had neither curiosity nor the capacity of being easily diverted : “ Where another person would see cheeriness and welcome in shop-lights he saw them revealing their many-coloured hideousness with shameless gas illumination ” ; political and national events hardly interested him at all ; he lived in his own world of thought, semi-detached from the life around him. And yet he chose London as the constant background of his novels, his choice being conditioned by necessity ; it was at once the scene he knew best and liked least. Out of the twenty-two novels which Gissing wrote, twenty-one have, at any rate in part, a London background. *Veranilda* is in the nature of the case the exception.

Lambeth, Hoxton, Islington, and Camberwell are the regions he prefers to describe ; he is chiefly concerned with the unfamiliar life which underlies the brilliant surface of the city. His favourite *milieu* is a world of endless streets of “ decently depressing ” houses ; shabby, dirty, neglected, obscure ; a world where shrubs and trees are rarely to be seen, where flowers are quite unknown. Churches even would have afforded the eye some architectural relief, but churches hardly enter into Gissing’s scheme of life. There is an occasional picture of a deserted city churchyard or a grimy prison, but these harmonize, rather than contrast, with their depressing surroundings. The one sharply-contrasting feature of the

scene, the flagrant cheerfulness of the public-house, serves but to intensify the impression of Gissing's London as a city of dull, drab, wearisome streets seen through an intermittent drizzle of rain.

The account of Caledonian Road, where Thyrza Trent found refuge, has all the distinctive notes of Gissing's descriptive style. If this fragment of the book alone remained, the student might readily identify it as his work by the presence of such phrases as "inveterate grime"; "labour that soils body and spirit"; "valley of the shadow of the vilest servitude"; and by the ring of the Latinized epithets—"ultimate achievement in ignoble hideousness"; "unconscious degradation has made its inexpugnable home."

Caledonian Road is a great channel of traffic running directly north from King's Cross to Holloway. It is doubtful whether London can show any thoroughfare of importance more offensive to eye, ear, and nostril. You stand at the entrance to it, and gaze into a region of supreme ugliness; every house front is marked with meanness and inveterate grime; every shop seems breaking forth with mould or dry rot; the people who walk here appear one and all to be employed in labour that soils body and spirit. Journey on the top of a tramcar from King's Cross to Holloway, and civilization has taught you its ultimate achievement in ignoble hideousness. You look off into narrow side-channels where unconscious degradation has made its inexpugnable home and sits veiled with refuse. You pass above lines of railway which cleave the region with black breathing fissure. You see the pavements half-occupied with the paltriest and most sordid wares; the sign of the pawnbroker is on every hand; the public-houses look and reek more intolerably than in other places. The population is dense; the poverty is undisguised. All this northward

bearing tract, between Camden Town on the one hand and Islington on the other, is the valley of the shadow of the vilest servitude. Its public monument is a Cyclopean prison ; save for the desert around the Great Northern Goods Depôt, its only open ground is a malodorous cattle-market. In comparison Lambeth is picturesque and venerable, St. Giles's is romantic, Hoxton is clean and suggestive of domesticity, Whitechapel is full of poetry, Limehouse is sweet with sea-breathings.*

It is against backgrounds such as these that Gissing's characters play out their parts. The backgrounds themselves are not unfamiliar to the dweller in the industrial north ; which, by the way, Gissing neither liked nor understood. What is unfamiliar is the absence of friendliness and good-will ; the depressing atmosphere of indifference, suspicion, even hostility. The descriptions of this "sea of life" in which Gissing's choicest spirits "are enisled" are largely, though not entirely, reminiscent of his own early struggles. To regard them as purely autobiographical is to underrate his creative art ; yet he, too, spent the years of his early manhood in exile ; he, too, knew what it was to go cold and supperless to bed ; to pace the London streets alone with not a soul to speak to. "The streets of London are terrible to one who is both lonely and unhappy," he makes one of his characters say ; "the indifference of their hard egotism becomes fierce hostility ; instead of merely disregarding, they crush." † Gissing himself had dealt with grudging, suspicious landladies, and knew what it felt to stand, unadmitted, before doors that "closed with that severity of exclusion in which London doors excel." "I should like to add to the

* *Thyrza*, p. 319. † *The Crown of Life*, p. 57.

Litany a new petition," he writes in *The Ryecroft Papers*, "for all inhabitants of great towns, and especially for all such as dwell in lodgings, boarding-houses, flats, or any other sordid substitute for Home which need or foolishness may have contrived." His chief characters are lonely by nature, temperamentally unfitted to make friends with the average people amongst whom their lot is cast. Circumstances certainly play a great part in separating them from possible friends, but their own peculiar traits of character play a greater. It is the essential loneliness of the odd, unattached people in London that Gissing emphasizes from first to last—sometimes with anger and impatience, more often with his own particular note of wistful pathos. Inspired by "Our Lady of Sighs" he writes :

In these gaunt streets along which he passed at night how many a sad heart suffered, by the dim glimmer that showed at upper windows, a hopeless solitude amid the innumerable throng ! Human cattle, the herd that feed and breed—with them it was well ; but for the few born to a desire for ever unattainable, the gentle spirits who from their prisoning circumstances looked up and afar—how the heart ached to think of them ! Some girl, of delicate instinct, of purpose sweet and pure, wasting her unloved life in toil and want and indignity ; some man, whose eyes grew haggard in the vain search for a companion promised in his dreams—they lived, these two, parted, perchance, only by a wall of neighbour houses, yet all huge London was between them, and their hands would never touch. Beside this hunger for love, what was the stomach-famine of a multitude that knew no other ? *

Gissing does not limit himself to the "ignobly decent "

* *The Crown of Life*, p. 268.

aspects of London. "The fact is," he observes, "the novel of everyday life is getting worn out. We must dig deeper, get to untouched social strata." * Consequently, in *The Unclassed*, and more particularly in *The Nether World*, he deals with the absolute squalor and sordid wretchedness of a spiritually-blighted region where "the east wind blows with a malice such as it never puts forth save where there are poorly-clad people to be pierced," a region where it is no unusual thing to hear "shrill voices of children playing at midnight between slum and gaol." Slums and tenements with their countless one-roomed houses, lacking the very essentials of decency, privacy and cleanliness, are depicted with unsparing fidelity, yet with restraint and a certain fastidiousness of touch which prevented Gissing from being a realist of the order of the Continent.

This underworld is the abode of countless overworked toilers who can never hope to achieve financial security. It is in describing their lot that Gissing writes some of his finest prose, rhythmical, sonorous, full of artistic contrast :

In the recesses of dim byways, where sunshine and free air are forgotten things, where families herd together in dear-rented garrets and cellars, craftsmen are for ever handling jewellery, shaping bright ornaments for the necks and arms of such as are born to the joy of life. Wealth inestimable is ever flowing through these workshops, and the hands that have been stained with gold-dust may, as likely as not, some day extend themselves in petition for a crust. . . . A strange enough region wherein to wander and muse. Inextinguishable laughter were, perchance,

* *The Unclassed*, p. 116.

the fittest result of such musing ; yet somehow the heart grows heavy, somehow the blood is troubled in its course and the pulses begin to throb hotly.*

Gissing rarely identifies himself with the suffering he is describing ; he is always a little aloof, a little detached from the actual life of the workers. He was incapable of such a passionate exhortation to rebellion as Shelley's *Song to the Men of England*, 1819. His attitude shows a curious mixture of pity and contempt. His nature admits of no facile brotherly kindness. He shrinks with disgust from contact with the coarseness, brutality, and ugliness which he describes. His constant protest against the mental and bodily degradation of his fellows is wrung from him by an acute imaginative experience of their woes. Seen through his eyes, their lot is hopeless, their misery unmitigated ; but it might not seem so to another observer, or to themselves. Dickens, for example, though some of his London street scenes are sufficiently grim, has always an eye for the redeeming features and for humours. His mind is diverted from the contemplation of misery by trifles—a curious shop-sign, a pawnbroker's transparency. That is the common reaction of the mind against insistent misery, the reaction, probably, of the slum-dwellers themselves. But Gissing absolutely concentrates on the misery he sees and intensifies it a thousandfold in the crucible of his sensitive mind. He makes no allowances ; overlooks every compensating feature. Custom has undoubtedly dulled the edge of wretchedness for the majority of slum-dwellers, and though the fact is no argument

* *The Nether World*, p. 11 (John Murray, 1903).

against social reform, it is an argument against supposing such people to be endowed with acute sensibilities and extraordinary capacity for suffering. There must be compensations, too, in slum-life ; its obligations are few ; its freedoms many. Gissing certainly lived in the world he describes—he was never of it ; and to this fact we owe the vividness of his descriptions. A more sympathetic observer could never have written the “ Io Saturnalia ” chapter in *The Nether World*. The fine quality of the irony demanded a certain detachment of view. An access of humanity would have spoilt it as literature. The note of serious, almost dignified, mockery with which this chapter opens is emphasized by allusions to the Roman festival :

So at length came Monday, the first Monday in August, a day gravely set apart for the repose and recreation of multitudes who neither know how to rest nor how to refresh themselves with pastime. To-day will the slaves of industrialism don the *pileus*. It is high summertime. With joy does the awaking publican look forth upon the blue-misty heavens and address his adorations to the Sun-god, inspirer of thirst. Throw wide the doors of the temple of Alcohol ! Behold, we come in our thousands, jingling the coins that shall purchase us this one day of tragical mirth. Before us is the dark and dreary autumn : it is the far cry to the foggy joys of Christmas. Io Saturnalia.*

The blatant attractions of the fair-ground are relentlessly set forth, and the writer comments : “ What a joy to observe the tendency of all these diversions ! How characteristic of a high-spirited people that nowhere could be found any amusement appealing to the mere mind, or

* *The Nether World*, p. 104.

calculated to effeminate by encouraging a love of beauty!"* Such passages serve to emphasize Gissing's remoteness from the life he is describing. It is inconsequent to expect the masses to devote their infrequent leisure to reading, or to the contemplation of the fine arts; these are the recreations of the trained mind. His critical, disapproving attitude is further seen in his description of the wearied crowd patiently awaiting the firework display at "The Paliss": "Mark the men in their turn; four in every six have visages so deformed by ill-health that they excite disgust; their legs are twisted out of shape by evil conditions of life from birth upwards. Whenever a youth and a girl come along arm-in-arm, how flagrantly shows the man's coarseness!" Then, with a momentary intrusion of an idealism which is rarely sentimental: "They are so pretty, many of these girls, delicate of feature, graceful did but slavery allow them natural development; and the heart sinks as one sees them side by side with the men who are to be their husbands."† To look long at the crowd, from Gissing's point of view, is to endorse his sentiment: "A great review of the People. Since men came into being did the world ever exhibit a sadder spectacle?"

But his point of view changed with years. They say that London is the nearest point from which an Irishman can see Kathleen-ni-Houlihan, and that the further away from her he wanders the more gracious and attractive does she appear. London never was, never could have been, Gissing's ideal as a place of residence. No city could give him the peace and restful quiet which his spirit craved. "Every day gives me a deeper loathing of city

* *The Nether World*, p. 107. † *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

life," he writes from Paris to Mr. Edward Clodd.* "If I cannot escape from it to die amid green fields my end will be wretched indeed." Still it is noteworthy that, after 1890, when his means enabled him to live out of London—in Devonshire, and, later, in the South of France—his treatment of the metropolis is leavened with a light, ironical humour as different as possible from the grave sincerity of his earlier work. Of course, distance was not the only determining factor in this change; maturity of mind and comparative prosperity helped also to modify his opinions. After *The Nether World* (1889) Gissing makes no attempt to insist upon the familiar backgrounds, the only lingering traces of his earlier manner being the descriptions of Biffen's garret in *New Grub Street* and of the sordid lodgings of the sisters in *The Odd Women*.

A few examples will make the change of temper abundantly clear. In *The Year of Jubilee* (1894) Gissing has again occasion to depict a holiday-making crowd, such as that described in *The Nether World* five years earlier; but the crowd no longer seems horrible and depressing; it is hilarious and amusing. The onlooker has changed his point of view:

Along the main thoroughfares of mid-London wheel-traffic was now suspended; between the houses moved a double current of humanity, this way and that, filling the whole space, so that no vehicle could possibly have made its way on the wonted track. At junctions pickets of police directed progress; the

* February 28, 1901. Cf. the pronouncement of Godwin Peak: "If I saw the probability of my dying in a London lodging-house I would go out into the sweet-scented fields and there kill myself."—*Born in Exile*, p. 146.

slowly advancing masses wheeled to left or right at word of command, carelessly obedient. But for an occasional bellow of hilarious blackguardism, or for a song uplifted by strident voices, or a cheer at some flaring symbol that pleased the passers, there was little noise ; only a thud, thud of footfalls numberless, and the low unvarying sound that suggested some huge beast purring to itself in stupid contentment.*

The scene, too, is changed from Hoxton, Islington, and Clerkenwell to Chelsea, Pinner, or Harrow. There are glimpses of open spaces—Clapham Common and Battersea Park ; the sweep of the Thames Embankment ; the seclusion of Lincoln's Inn gardens. The pressure of circumstances is no longer intolerable. Gissing ultimately realizes something of the communal cheerfulness of crowded city life ; something of the fascination of its traffic. Thus he writes of Mr. Gammon in *The Town Traveller* :

Above all, he liked to find himself in the Strand at that hour of the day when east and west show a double current of continuous traffic, tight-wedged in the narrow street, moving at a mere foot-pace, every horse's nose touching the back of the next vehicle. The sun could not shine too hotly : it made colours brighter, gave a new beauty to the glittering public-houses, where names of cooling drinks seemed to cry aloud. He enjoyed a "block," and was disappointed unless he saw a policeman at Wellington Street holding up his hand whilst the cross traffic from north to south rolled grandly through. It always reminded him of the Biblestory—Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea.†

A delightful touch there of Gissing's literary humour !

* *In the Year of Jubilee*, p. 68.

† *The Town Traveller*, p. 80 (Methuen, 1898).

The later Gissing thus describes the sensations of Will Warburton hurrying back to London after a week's holiday abroad : " True, he had been absent only a week, but the time seemed to him so long that he felt it must have teemed with events. In the railway carriage he glowed with good fellowship toward the other passengers ; the rain-beaten hop-lands rejoiced his eyes, and the first houses of London were so many friendly faces greeting his return." Thus, painfully and after many vicissitudes, Gissing arrives at the standpoint of the average man who regards the scene of his long residence with tolerance, if not with affection. A true lover of London he never became, never cherished " the very dust of the city " as his beloved Gibbon is said to have done. London was to him the hub of the literary universe, it is true, yet he could never, at any time, have fully endorsed Johnson's " No, sir, when a man is tired of London he is tired of life ; for there is in London all that life can afford."

To love and describe nature faithfully one must either live in daily communion with her or be able to draw upon a store of early memories. Circumstances forced Gissing into city life, but early recollections of nature, though long repressed, must have prompted that mature beauty of natural description which is one of the charms of his later work. His father was a botanist of no mean order, and his father's garden, at some little distance from the house, is faithfully described in *A Life's Morning*.* From the age of sixteen until a few years before his death

* P. 107 (Smith, Elder and Co., 1914).

Gissing's life was almost entirely pent in cities ; in Manchester, in various cities of America, and in London. "Through my youth and early manhood," he writes, "I found more pleasure in nature as represented in art than in nature herself." * This confession, as also the grim character of the subjects with which his earlier novels are preoccupied, accounts for his unostentatious treatment of natural beauty. As Johnson rather unjustly said of Milton, "he saw nature through the spectacles of books." It was from the classics and from the great seventeenth-century prose writers that Gissing borrowed his literary lenses. For years he was unable to get away from city life to refresh his spirit at the spring of natural beauty. As he says : "It is strange now to remember that for six or seven years I never looked upon a meadow, never travelled even so far as to the tree-bordered suburbs. I was battling for life." † This virtual imprisonment accounts, no doubt, for his particular enthusiasm for open spaces, for the sweeps of sea and sky. ‡ *The Ryecroft Papers* gives the best account of his awakening sense of the beauties of nature :

Then first did I know myself for a sun-worshipper. . . . Under that radiant firmament I could have thrown myself upon my knees in adoration. As I walked I found myself avoiding every strip of shadow ; were it but that of a birch trunk I felt as if it robbed me of the day's delight. I went bareheaded, that the golden beams might shed upon me their unstinted blessing. . . . In a single day I had matured astonishingly : which means,

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 83.

† *Ibid.*, p. 19.

‡ Thyrza's first glimpse of the sea (*Thyrza*, p. 182). Sunset at Athens (*New Grub Street*, pp. 335-336).

no doubt, that I suddenly entered into conscious enjoyment of powers and sensibilities which had been developing unknown to me. To instance only one point : till then I had cared very little about plants and flowers, but now I found myself eagerly interested in every blossom, in every growth of the wayside. . . . Nor was it a passing humour ; never since have I lost my pleasure in the flowers of the field and my desire to know them all.*

Despite this profession of quickened sensibilities, the fact remains that Gissing was far better at portraiture than at landscape, though occasionally in *The Ryecroft Papers* he achieves a precision of glowing colour such as enamels Tennyson's verse. On the whole he is too closely occupied with urban humanity to turn aside for natural description. "Notably," says a critic in *The Dial*, "there is little indulgence in verbal landscape-painting—that ingenious modern device for filling up the time (and the page) while awaiting some delayed train of thought." †

Gissing has no sense of that fundamental unity between man and nature upon which Wordsworth counts and in which Jefferies rejoices. "Joy in widest commonalty spread" finds no echo in his work. He has, moreover, no share in the master's attitude of wise passivity to natural impulse, no heritage of Wordsworth's "healing power." Like Matthew Arnold, in this respect, he is an eager, striving, aspiring soul. Yet an echo of Wordsworth may be heard in his description of Annabel Newthorp : "Her head was wont to droop thoughtfully and her step measured itself to the grave music of a mind which knew the influence of mountain solitude," ‡ while his constant habit

* *Ryecroft Papers*, pp. 24-25. † June 1916.

‡ *Thyrza*, p. 3.

of regarding natural beauty as the source of future happy memories rather than as the occasion of present joy forms another link with the poet of "emotion recollected in tranquillity." *

It is noteworthy that, immediately after his first visit to Italy (consequent upon the financial success of *Demos*), descriptions of scenery occur more frequently in his work. Of the five novels which he published successively after this holiday abroad, three show distinctly an awakened appreciation of natural beauty.† The early part of *A Life's Morning* has rich glimpses of Surrey landscape, described with a buoyancy unusual in Gissing. The influence of Meredith affects not only the characters but the setting of this story. The brief moonlight scene in the garden between Wilfrid and Emily is one of Gissing's few successful love passages, and deserves to rank with those of Meredith and Turgenev as a triumph of delicacy and restraint.‡ The lyrical joy of love is sustained throughout the watches of the night and lingers until Emily goes out to meet her lover :

Emily's heart lacked no morning hymn ; every sense revelled in that pure joy which is the poetry of praise. She wished it had been near the hour of meeting, yet again was glad to have time to prepare herself. Walking, she drank in the loveliness about her, marked the forms of trees, the light and shade of heavy leafage, the blendings of colour by the roadsides, the grace of re-

* See quotations from *A Life's Morning* on p. 45, and from *The Emancipated* on p. 46 of this chapter.

† I.e. *A Life's Morning* ; *The Nether World* ; *The Emancipated*.

‡ Cf. the meeting of Wilfrid and Emilia by Wilming Weir (*Sandra Belloni*).

mote distances ; all these things she was making part of herself that in memory they might be a joy for ever.*

Peaceful Surrey hills and Essex meadows serve as a foil to the gloomy monochrome of *The Nether World*.

At noon to-day there was sunlight on the Surrey hills : the fields and lanes were fragrant with the first breath of spring, and from the shelter of the budding copses many a primrose looked tremblingly up to the vision of the blue sky. But of these things Clerkenwell takes no count : here it had been a day like any other, consisting of so many hours, each representing a fraction of the weekly wage.†

Quoting from the same book a description of Danbury Hill, Mr. Seccombe praises the perfect justice of Gissing's phrasing, so completely in accordance "with the quiet undemonstrative nature of the scenery described."‡ It is always the gentler aspects of nature which appeal to Gissing. He has no conception of the chastened sublimity which Mr. Hardy delights to portray. The country is, for him, mainly a place of refuge and repose from the strain and stress of city life.

The scene of *The Emancipated*, being laid in Italy, gives scope for direct reminiscences of the writer's holiday abroad. The glorious southern skies seem, above all, to have fired his imagination and to have left upon his mind a lasting impression of serenity and joy. There is one picture of sunset at Naples, as full of light and colour and beauty as anything he ever wrote :

* *A Life's Morning*, p. 48. † *The Nether World*, p. 10.

‡ *The House of Cobwebs*. An Introductory Survey, p. xxiv (Constable).

Over all, the hues of an autumn evening in Campania. From behind a bulk of cloud, here and there tossed by high wind currents into fantastic shapes, sprang rays of fire, burning to the zenith. Between the sea-beach at Bagnoli and the summit at Ischia, tract followed upon tract of colour that each moment underwent a subtle change, darkening here, there fading into exquisite transparencies of distance, till by degrees the islands lost projection and became mere films against the declining day. The plain was ruddy with dead vine-leaves and golden with the decaying foliage of the poplars; Camaldoli and its neighbour heights stood gorgeously enrobed. In itself a picture so beautiful that the eye wearied with delight; in its memories a source of solemn joy, inexhaustible for ever.*

Writing to Mr. Clodd in September 1897, Gissing says:

Thank you heartily for the kind things you say about *The Emancipated*, the pleasanter to me in that this book fell dead at publication, and is nowadays hardly ever mentioned. You know my passionate delight in Southern Italy, and, indeed, I thought that the landscape of the book was not altogether bad. Strengthened by your opinion, I shall still take leave to think in the same way about it.

As the Italian memories faded, so faded Gissing's fleeting sense of colour. The nature passages in the novels become fewer, though *The Whirlpool* furnishes descriptions of country life in Wales and *In the Year of Jubilee* gives glimpses of shady woods and upward-climbing Devon lanes. As Mr. Seccombe puts it: "He makes no attempt at the rich colouring of Kingsley or Blackmore, but, as page after page of *Ryecroft* testifies . . . he is a perfect master of the *aquarelle*."

* *The Emancipated*, pp. 12-13 (A. H. Bullen, 1901).

There is little of the glow and vigour and radiance of nature in *The Ryecroft Papers*; their temper recalls Gray's *Elegy* in its calm, subdued, almost melancholy portrayal of natural beauty. The very joy of bird-song in Spring is chastened with an after-thought :

All about my garden to-day the birds are loud. To say that the air is filled with their song gives no idea of the ceaseless piping, whistling, trilling which at moments rings to heaven in a triumphant unison—a wild accord. Now and then I notice one of the smaller songsters who seems to strain his throat in a madly joyous endeavour to out-carol the rest. It is a chorus of praise such as none other of earth's children have the voice or the heart to utter.*

It is a scholar's love of nature that is here revealed ; the appreciation of the "gracious silences" of the country after the noises of the town ; the lingering regret that this retirement came too late to furnish "a long retrospect of bowered peace." The words "calm," "quiet," "rest," "peace" constantly recur, as in the following description of his favourite season of the day and year :

At sunset I stood in the meadow above my house and watched the red orb sink into purple mist, whilst in the violet heaven behind me rose the perfect moon. All between, through the soft circling of the dial's shadow, was loveliness and quiet unutterable. Never, I could fancy, did autumn clothe in such magnificence the elms and beeches ; never, I should think, did the leafage on my walls blaze in such royal crimson. It was no day for wandering ; under a canopy of blue and gold, where the eye could fall on nothing that was not beautiful, enough to be at one with nature in dreamy rest. From stubble-fields sounded the long

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 64.

caw of the rooks ; a sleepy crowing ever and anon told of the neighbouring farms ; my doves cooed in their cot. Was it for five minutes, or was it for an hour, that I watched the yellow butterfly wafted as by an insensible tremor of air amid the garden glintings ? In every autumn there comes one such flawless day. None that I have ever known brought me a mind so touched to the fitting mood of welcome, and so fulfilled the promise of its peace.*

In this "confessional" type of literature, where personal reminiscence mingles with natural description, the obvious danger is sentimentality, a danger which Gissing does not wholly escape. He is a little apt to lose sight of the scene before him in contemplating his own emotions ; consequently he is happiest where he can reinforce his impressions of nature with literary association and allusion. This is his own confession of faith :

Think merely how one's view of common things is affected by literary association. What were honey to me if I knew nothing of Hymettus and Hybla ?—if my mind had no store of poetry, no memories of romance ? Suppose me town-pent ; the name might bring with it some pleasantries of rustic odour ; but of what poor significance even that, if the country were to me mere grass and corn and vegetables, as to the man who has never read nor wished to read.

There speaks the intellectual Pharisee, but the end of the paragraph more than compensates for the momentary irritation :

For the Poet is indeed a Maker : above the world of sense, trodden by hidebound humanity, he builds that world of his own

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 204.

whereto is summoned the unfettered spirit. Why does it delight me to see the bat flitting at dusk before my window, or to hear the hoot of the owl when all the ways are dark ? I might regard the bat with disgust, and the owl either with vague superstition or not heed it at all. But these have their place in the poet's world, and carry me above this idle present.*

"This idle present." There we have the constant minor key-note of Gissing's thought which turns his pæan of nature into an elegy. Like Butler's Erewhonians, he was drawn through life with his face towards the past. "Every man has his intellectual desire," he confesses ; "mine is to escape life as I know it and dream myself into that old world which was the imaginative delight of my boyhood." It was given him to travel in his beloved Magna Græcia, brooding constantly upon the relics of that earlier civilization which he so greatly preferred to our own. His impressions are recorded in his delightful little book of travel, *By the Ionian Sea*, which, one feels, he rejoiced to write, and which shows historical imagination of an order to awaken regret that he did not more fully develop this particular gift. Here, if anywhere, one would expect to find passages of vivid natural description ; here, as everywhere, fresh scenes serve but to emphasize old memories. The title of his book might well have been *The Scholar Abroad*, so closely are the descriptions of natural scenery interwoven with reminiscences of reading. The sulphur yellow of Vesuvius against a sky of cloudless blue ; the lemon-orchards and orange-groves ; the pine-woods, laurels, and myrtles—all are duly noted ; but the heart of the writer is elsewhere. "To-day seems an

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 129.

unreality, an idle impertinence ; the real was that long-buried past which gave its meaning to all about me, touching the night with infinite pathos."

At Taranto he goes out of his way to discover Horace's *dulce Galæsi flumen*, with disappointing results, yet the very name is enough to unlock his happiest store of memories and he sits down by the reed-bound stream, reciting to himself the praises which the district won from Horace and Virgil in days gone by.* The ruined temple at Metapontum suggests to him "the pathos of immemorial desolation." Standing within its precincts overgrown with flowering plants he notices how "nature's vitality triumphed over the greatness of forgotten men." So long as Gissing lived some few of the ancients, at any rate, were immortal. He spends his last half-hour at Metapontum "in a hidden corner of the eucalyptus grove, trying to shape in fancy some figure of old Pythagoras . . . a type of aspiring humanity, a sweet and noble figure, moving as a dim radiance through legendary Hellas." From Squillace (Virgil's ship-wrecking Scyllaceum) he walks to Mons Moscius, where Cassiodorus founded his religious house, and standing in full view of it he meditates, not merely upon the actual scene, but upon the qualities of that distinguished fifth-century statesman.

Gissing seems to have appreciated, though he never formulated, the distinction which Professor Gilbert Murray so clearly stated in *Religio Grammatici* : "There are in life two elements, one transitory and progressive,

* *By the Ionian Sea*, p. 54 (Chapman and Hall, 1917).

the other comparatively, if not absolutely, non-progressive and eternal, and the Soul of man is chiefly concerned with the second . . . one might say roughly that material things are superseded but spiritual things are not." From such a standpoint Gissing's tribute to the past is not excessive ; his indifference to the present, not extreme ; his treatment of nature, not inexplicable. At home or abroad intellectual appreciation is for him the very breath of life. Even on a holiday his mood is tranquil and sober. He has odd moments of unexpected pleasure : his delight in the street music of Naples ; his appreciation of the beauty and lineage of the Calabrian peasant pottery ; his sense of the changelessness of the lives of Taranto fishermen from the days of Plato down to the present time ; his delighted recognition of the motto from the *Acts of the Apostles* carved on the Cathedral at Reggio : "*Circum-legentes devenimus Rhegium*" ; but his prevailing mood is one of pensive sadness ; his prevailing note a Lydian "moan about the retrospect."

Chapter III

Characterization

GISSING's greatest achievement is undoubtedly his delineation of the young man of the period. His heroes are rarely men of action ; their tragedies are psychological ; thus they fail to achieve popularity, though they bid fair to become a touchstone of criticism both in life and in letters. His portraits of young men are largely autobiographical, and further, they show the workings of the same "time-spirit" that influenced Turgenev in the creation of Rudin, and Hardy in the evolution of Jude. In a letter, quoted by Mr. Morley Roberts, complaining of the obtuseness of contemporary critics, Gissing expressly declares that his books deal with "a class of young men distinctive of our time : well-educated, fairly-bred, but without money." *

Rudin, the brilliant young Russian, with his enthusiastic bursts of poetic eloquence, seems at first sight to afford a contrast rather than a comparison with the shy, studious English youths whom Gissing portrays. And yet Rudin's constant appeals for sympathy ; his curious defect of will-power ; his tortuous, introspective habit of mind ; his consequent instability of purpose, especially with regard to marriage, contribute to the delineation of a character sufficiently familiar to the English novelist's readers, while his apostrophe : "Alas ! at thirty-five to be still preparing for something !" recalls the many false starts of Gissing's characters before they become reconciled to the ways and means of life.

That unsparing sincerity of modern fiction, that flaying

* *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, p. 311.

insight which, for lack of a more precise term, we call realism, has had a marked effect on the novelist's attitude towards beauty. There seems to be the germ of a philosophical truth in that favourite test-question of childhood, "Would you rather be pretty *or* clever?" Meredith, almost alone amongst the greater writers of his land and time, endows his characters with physical beauty and charm as well as intellectual and spiritual valiancy. Hardy repeatedly denies the possibility of the harmonious development of mind and body; in his opinion the one must be sacrificed to the other, as in the case of Clem Yeobright, who "already showed that thought is a disease of the flesh, and indirectly bore evidence that ideal physical beauty is incompatible with emotional development and a full recognition of the coil of things." Gissing constantly sounds the same note of warning:

The man of thought, as we understand him, is all but necessarily the man of impaired health. . . . The man I have in view is he who pursues the things of the mind with passion, who turns impatiently from all common interests or cares which encroach upon his sacred time, who is haunted by a sense of the infinity of thought and learning, who, sadly aware of the conditions on which he holds his mental vitality, cannot resist the hourly temptation to ignore them.*

Gissing's heroes are nearly all of this type.

In its insistence upon the intellectual hero and heroine the Victorian novel reflects one current of contemporary thought. Most of the great writers of the period, whether poets, essayists, or novelists, show a strong intellectual bias. They are not content to achieve fame simply by the

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 198.

exercise of imagination ; they distrust inspiration as a sufficient motive-power, and hesitate to write with a zeal not according to knowledge ; hard thinkers one and all, their reputation rests steadily on "fundamental brain-work." Sometimes, as in Browning and Meredith, thought is triumphant and constructive : a new and conquering philosophy of life is evolved. But on the whole the minor key predominates, and the "discouraged generation of 1850" is more closely reflected by the sceptical, critical, indeterminate attitude of Gissing, or by the graver pessimism of Thomas Hardy. Both are a little inclined to recognize only the failures of Providence.

The note of revolt against a false religion and a conventional morality is strong in Hardy. Jude, like Godwin Peak, is born in exile, nor in exile only, but in bondage to the older traditions of morality and religion. Gissing loses an artistic opportunity in showing Godwin Peak already emancipated from the old theology when first he is introduced to the reader.* There are possibilities of tragedy in Jude's situation which are lacking in the case of Gissing's hero. The process of intellectual revolt is almost necessarily a painful one, since emancipation is so rarely complete. To the last, Jude's conscience is troubled with misgivings, with doubts, and with fears. Again, Jude's ambition to become a scholar, to storm the gates of the city of learning, is an honourable, indeed a laudable, ambition, whereas the *motif* of *Born in Exile* would appeal to very few people and might actually alienate many.

* It is possible that the Rev. Chas. Anderson, Vicar of St. John's, Limehouse, suggested some of the trains of thought in this book. (*See Clodd's Memories.*)

The cynic might acclaim the exploits of a hero who entered the Church to secure a livelihood ; who lived by a creed he despised ; who eventually became a bishop and died in the odour of sanctity ; but he would dismiss as incomprehensible or snobbish Godwin Peak's intention of taking orders so that he might meet and marry a woman of quality. It seems more than probable that Gissing took a hint from *Alton Locke* (1850) in his creation of Godwin Peak. Alton's worldly cousin George urges him to turn priest with a view to social advancement :

If you are once a parson, all is safe. Be you who you may before, from that moment you are a gentleman. No one will offer you an insult. You are good enough for any man's society. You can dine at any nobleman's table. You can be friend, confidant, father-confessor if you like, to the highest women in the land ; and if you have person, manner, and common sense marry one of them into the bargain, Alton, my boy.

The suggestion gains colour from the resemblance between Kingsley's Dean Winnstay surrounded by cabinets, curiosities, bones and fossils, the proud author of a pamphlet on the *Geryon Trifurcifer*, and Gissing's Mr. Warricombe, with his gentlemanly geological tastes and his inner life of postponed theological debate.

Gissing's conception of the tragedy of life is largely determined by his reading of Greek literature. His constant theme is one of the oldest in existence—the revolt of man against circumstance—or, to state it in modern terms, the conflict between temperament, heredity, and environment. He takes a fine, sometimes a superfine, nature, a little lacking in moral courage, yet saved from anything approaching baseness by a woven

strand of idealism and aspiration ; he endows the youth with more than average brains, and less than an average income ; he leaves him deficient in self-confidence, then sets him to wrestle with a not-quite-possible task—to force his way, handicapped by birth and breeding, into a higher sphere of society, to achieve success as a novelist, hampered by failing health and hope and an exacting artistic conscience.

The ideas of Nemesis and of the propitiation of the gods are especially prominent in *A Life's Morning*.* Presages of evil torment the mind of Emily Hood. "The misery of her parents' home haunted her, and by no effort could she expel the superstition that she had only escaped from that for a time, that its claws would surely overtake her and fix themselves again in her flesh."† The hero, Wilfrid Athel, is Gissing's nearest approach to a portrait in the manner of Meredith.‡ He rebels strenuously against the Fate which would part him from Emily, and his creator exclaims :

Fortunate fellow, who had laid behind him thus much of his earthly journey without one day of grave suffering. Ah, something he should have sacrificed to the envious gods, some lesser joy, that the essential happiness of his life might be spared him. Wilfrid had yet to learn that every sun that rises for us in untroubled sky is a portent of inevitable gloom ; that nature only

* A thousand pities that an intrusive publisher demanded the sacrifice of a promising tragedy to the gods which prescribe a conventional happy ending.

† *A Life's Morning*, p. 60.

‡ See also Hubert Eldon (*Demos*) and Lionel Tarrent (*In the Year of Jubilee*).

prolongs our holiday to make the journey-work of misery the harder to bear.*

Such a view of life is simply morbid. Fortunately it does not represent Gissing's whole philosophy, though it must be admitted to be the expression of a constantly-recurring mood.

A feminine admirer wrote appealingly to one of Gissing's friends: "*Do* ask Mr. Gissing to make his characters a little better off." They would be impoverished in the process! A small competency would have reduced Godwin Peak or Edwin Reardon to non-entity. Poverty is an artistic necessity in Gissing's strongest work: it supplies that element of contrast without which tragedy cannot take shape. It is the direct cause of suicide in *A Life's Morning*, of misery and misunderstanding in *New Grub Street*, of hypocrisy and concealment in *Born in Exile*. Poverty certainly is a demoralizing circumstance; according to Gissing, it is "the root of all social ills." The peculiarly low key in which his tragedies are pitched is determined by that lack of resilience in his characters directly occasioned by their poverty.

Take the character of Gilbert Grail for instance, a lonely, studious, aspiring artisan, a man who spends his infrequent leisure in Westminster Abbey paying homage to the writers he considers "men greater than kings." There would be no tragedy in his tastes but for his circumstances, and, although Gissing never points this moral, no tragedy in his circumstances but for his tastes.

* *A Life's Morning*, p. 247.

He could not live as his fellow-workmen did, coming home to satisfy his hunger and spend a couple of hours in recreation, then to well-earned sleep. Every minute of freedom, of time in which he was no longer a machine but a thinking and desiring man, he held precious as fine gold. How could he yield to heaviness and sleep when books lay open before him, and knowledge, the goddess of his worship, whispered wondrous promises? . . . Daily his thirteen hours went to the manufacture of candles, and the evening leisure, with one free day in the week, was all he could ever hope for.*

At thirty-five, handicapped by failing health, he has reached his maximum wage of forty shillings a week and pauses to review his past :

The purpose he knew was frustrated. The " Might-have-been," which is also called " No More, Too Late, Farewell," often stared him in the eyes with those unchanging orbs of ghastliness, chilling the flow of his blood and making life the cruellest of mockeries.†

Gissing knew from bitter experience the effect of poverty and seclusion on a nature such as this—

Yet he was not driven to that kind of resentment which makes the revolutionary spirit. His personality was essentially that of a student ; conservative instincts were stronger in him than the misery which accused his fortune. A touch of creative genius, and you had the man whose song would lead battle against the hoary iniquities of the world. That was denied him : he could only eat his own heart in despair, his protest against the outrage of fate a desolate silence.‡

The man's life was a tragedy already without any emotional complications.

* *Thyrza*, pp. 67-68. † *Ibid.*, pp. 67-70. ‡ *Ibid.*

It is a curious and faithful study, this miserable quiescence of Gissing's characters, their passivity in the face of poverty or disaster. In *The Wheels of Chance*, Mr. H. G. Wells comments on this feature of his friend's work. Writing of his own hero, Hoopdriver, whose passion for cycling makes the one bright spot in a dreary existence, he says, "his real life was absolutely uninteresting, and if he had faced it as such people do in Mr. Gissing's novels he would have come by way of drink to suicide in the course of a year." Gissing goes deeper into life than this; the tragedy of his characters is not that they are frustrated and die, but that they are frustrated and live. That is true realism; men do not commit suicide when things go wrong, even desperately wrong; they rave or pray, according to their upbringing; take refuge in compensating circumstances; call optimism or stoicism to their aid, and continue to earn their daily bread.* But Gissing's young men are unique in one particular—they are pessimists from the cradle and lose one spring of action thereby. Gissing absolutely discounts hopefulness as a motive for continued existence in the face of disaster, consequently he has to enter into elaborate psychological explanations to make the conduct of his characters credible.

What constrains Edwin Reardon to live on in a garret, surrounded by poverty and squalor, conscious of failing health and mentality, ignored by the wife he adored? Gissing explains:

* If anyone would prove the power and sincerity of Gissing's art let him read in succession *New Grub Street* and Leonard Merrick's *Cynthia*, and see which leaves the abiding impression of veracity and depth of thought.

It was by force of commiserating his own lot that Edwin Reardon continued to live. . . . Refuge from despair is often found in the passion of self-pity and that spirit of obstinate resistance which it engenders. In certain natures the extreme of self-pity is intolerable, and leads to self-destruction ; but there are less fortunate beings whom the vehemence of their revolt against fate strengthens to endure in suffering. These latter are rather imaginative than passionate ; the stages of their woe impress them as the acts of a drama, which they cannot bring themselves to cut short, so various are the possibilities of its dark motive. The intellectual man who kills himself is most often brought to that decision by conviction of his insignificance ; self-pity verges in self-scorn, and the humiliated soul is intolerant of existence. He who survives under like conditions does so because misery magnifies him in his own estimate.*

Despite the late Lieut. W. T. Young's assertion to the contrary,† Gissing is a close student of heredity. "What if his life were to be a struggle between inherited sympathies and the affinities of his intellect ?" he writes of Walter Egremont,‡ and the problem is one which continually preoccupies him. No modern writer has taken greater care to make his characters consistent, not only with themselves, but with their parentage. To throw light on the character of Richard Mutimer, the hero of *Demos*, he pushes his investigations back to the third generation, discovering the zeal of the Chartist grandfather to account for the grandson's political faith. The vein of chivalry in Gissing's nature never leads him to in-

* *New Grub Street*, p. 304.

† *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. xiii, ch. 14.

‡ *Thyrza*, p. 83.

discriminate idealism in his delineation of girls and women. He is careful to account for the innate refinement of Thyrsa's nature by stating that her mother was an educated woman. Again, in describing Richard Dagworthy, the Yorkshire mill-owner in *A Life's Morning*, a character which recalls Charlotte Brontë's Robert Moore, Gissing states with precision the historical position of his subject: "Dagworthy represented an intermediate stage of development between the hard-headed operative who conquers wealth, and his descendant who shall know how to make use of it." * John Hewett, the poor baffled artisan in *The Nether World*, a man whose early generous aspirations and instincts of rebellion have been checked by misfortune, had a beautiful daughter Clara, who "intensified in her personality an inheritance of revolt." She "aimed at stage-triumph as a means of becoming naturalized amongst that race of beings whom birth and breeding exalt above the multitude." A strange civilization, indeed, which offers social distinction to its men by way of the Church and to its women by way of the stage! Here, indeed, is matter for comment had Gissing been a pure satirist. Edwin Reardon, the poverty-stricken author in *New Grub Street*, is the son of a poor photographer, "a man of whims and idealisms," who followed many pursuits and succeeded in none. Godwin Peak's father, again, is a struggling dispenser of medicine "of

* *A Life's Morning*, p. 115. There is no suggestion here of reminiscence, though Gissing was an admirer of Charlotte Brontë. It is simply that both artists are viewing the same type of character—a type indigenous to the wind-swept Yorkshire moors of their childhood.

stubborn, ungainly integrity and headlong irascibility," a man whose perversity of arrogance made him pay income-tax where he might have avoided it ; the fact is a biography in itself ! Gissing further relates that Peak's father was born in a London alley, " the son of a labourer with a large family ; he made his way by sheer force of character to a position which would have been proud success but for the difficulty with which he kept himself alive." *

In each case the subsequent development of character is referred back, sooner or later, to its supposed source. The most striking instance, perhaps, is the analysis of Godwin Peak's feelings when, at heart a sceptic, he has made public profession of the Christian belief :

Shame buffeted him on the right cheek and the left : he looked about like one who shrinks from merited chastisement. Oh, thrice ignoble varlet ! To pose with unctuous hypocrisy before people who had welcomed him under their roof unquestioned, with all the grace and kindness of English hospitality. . . . But he, he who had ever prided himself on his truth-fronting intellect, and had freely uttered his scorn of the credulous mob ! He who was his own criterion of moral right and wrong ! No wonder he felt like a whipped cur. It was the ancestral vice in his blood, brought out by over-tempting circumstance. The long line of base-born predecessors, the grovelling hinds and mechanics of his genealogy, were responsible for this. Oh, for a name wherewith honour was hereditary ! †

There is, of course, no such name ; integrity disregards class distinctions. Gissing, moreover, sets an absurdly high value on the mere externals of education and refinement,

* *Born in Exile*, p. 31.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

but then he is always pleading a special case. As a matter of fact, he has as good a right to uphold the intellectual aristocracy of obscure young men of lowly birth as the "kailyard" writers have to insist upon the moral supremacy of the peasant. Gissing's appeal to posterity will probably rest upon his faithful delineation of the struggles of these contemporary young men to whom intellectual and emotional aspiration is at once the safeguard of morality and the substitute for religion. They will remain representative of an age in which "the fruits of the spirit" were at a discount.

From first to last Gissing's heroes are idealists where women are concerned. "In all women he had supreme faith; that one woman whom his heart imagined was a pure and noble creature, with measureless aspiration; womanhood glorified in her to the type of the upward-striving soul." * So Gissing writes of Gilbert Grail. The sentiment is his own, and finds more direct expression in his description of Emily Hood. "Imagine the great artist Nature bent upon the creation of a soul which should hold in subtlest perfection every element essential to the successive ideals of maiden, wife, mother, and the soul of this girl is pictured." Woman appeals to Gissing as a civilizing, an ennobling, yet at the same time a conservative force, "the natural safeguard of traditions that have an abiding value." In the character of Godwin Peak, Gissing's two idealisms are united: the love of culture for its own sake, and of woman as its highest incarnation. Half defiantly, Peak confides his curiously incomplete ideal to Earwaker, his better-balanced friend; "I have no

* *Thyrza*, p. 70.

other ambition in life—no other ! Think the confession as ridiculous as you like ; my one supreme desire is to marry a perfectly refined woman. Put it in the correct terms. I am a plebeian, and I aim at marrying a lady.” * His period of probationary study for the Church is spent at Exeter, where he renews an acquaintance with the Warricombes dating back to his college days. Throughout this time his constant motive is represented as “a craving for love capable only of a social (one might almost say, of a political) definition.” The woman throned in his imagination was “no individual, but the type of an order.” † Constant association with Sidwell Warricombe, however, soon crystallizes his vague aspiration into love for her, but his vagrant fancy still wanders at will amongst cosmopolitan and emancipated women beyond his ken.

But must not something of kindly condescension always blend with his admiring devotedness ? Were it but possible to win the love of a woman who looked forth with eyes thoroughly purged from all the mist of tradition and conventionalism, who was at home amongst arts and sciences, who, like himself, acknowledged no class, and bowed to no authority but that of the supreme human mind ! ‡

The ideal of womanhood is maturing since the earlier days of Bernard Kingcote’s unquestioning worship of Isabel Clarendon and Gilbert Grail’s tender devotion to Thyrza. It is no longer woman as woman, but woman as an intellectual equal and companion that Gissing’s heroes henceforth profess to desire.

* *Born in Exile*, p. 151.

† *Ibid.*, p. 235.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

The fact that Godwin Peak can, and does, at one and the same time love Sidwell and speculate about other, though imaginary women, indicates the subtlety of Gissing's psychology of the emotions. This was a state of mind with which he was constantly preoccupied. Thus Arthur Golding, in *Workers in the Dawn*, is already married when he discovers his love for Helen Norman ; Osmond Waymark, in *The Unclassed*, is betrothed to Maud Enderby yet in love with Ida Starr ; Richard Mutimer, in *Demos*, is engaged to Emma Vine when he marries Adela Waltham ; Walter Egremont hesitates between Thyrza and Annabel Newthorpe. The other side of the picture is drawn in lighter and less convincing manner in *Eve's Ransom* and *The Town Traveller*, with the faithless Eve Madeley and the mercurial Polly Sparkes as models. Gissing makes no new discovery, it is true, but he devotes much time and patience to analysis of the mutability of human purpose and affection—it is rarely passion in Gissing—and he comes nearest, perchance, to an explanation of this defect in “ the nature of things ” where he says, “ Godwin Peak was not framed for romantic languishment. In general, the more complex a man's mechanism and the more pronounced his habit of introspection the less capable is he of loving with vehemence and constancy. Heroes of passion are for the most part primitive natures, nobly tempered ; in our time they tend to extinction.” *

Gissing makes one grave mistake, especially in his earlier delineations of women. His idealism will hardly allow that their qualities and motives are just as likely to

* *Born in Exile*, p. 265.

be mixed as those of men. Women like Maud Enderby in *The Unclassed*, and Emily Hood in *A Life's Morning*, are, quite literally, too good to be true ; they leave us cold. There is a tendency for his women to become types rather than individuals ; all goodness and graciousness, tenderness and dependence, like Thyrza or Cecily Doran or even Sidwell Warricombe, or all brains and brusquerie, aloofness and independence, like Rhoda Nunn, Constance Bride, or Miss Rodney. And yet Thyrza, with all her limitations, is an artistic success. So is Hetty Sorrel. But Hetty is human nature, Thyrza is human nature sublimated, in Aristotelian phrase, better than life. There is much of Gissing himself in *Thyrza*, his fine enthusiasm for literature, his exile in America, his return to England to his first-beloved. Thyrza herself is the dream-woman of Gissing's early, chivalrous nature ; had he actually met her, all might have been well.

To the modern emancipated woman Gissing is hardly fair ; her character, perhaps, demands a feminine interpreter, but his young girls are charming in the best English tradition and will bear comparison with Trollope's Eleanor Bold and Grace Crawley. Meredith's influence may be traced in *The Emancipated*. Cecily Doran, like Richard Feverel, is brought up on a system, by Mrs. Lessingham, her aunt, who has endeavoured to give free play to all the girl's faculties and to train her to regard life without rose-coloured spectacles. And the result ? Cecily, when first introduced to the reader, is a bright, buoyant, young English girl, enjoying her first visit to Italy, "her countenance telling of instruction, thought, spirit." But the system is not fool-proof, and Cecily falls

in love with the worthless Reuben Elgar, who plans a farewell meeting in the ruins of Pompeii :

“ I have stayed only to see you again,” came panting from his lips. “ I could not go till I had seen you again.”

And before the winged syllables had ceased, their eyes met : nor their eyes alone, for upon both was the constraint of passion that leaps like flame to its desire—mouth to mouth and heart to heart for one instant that concentrated all the joy of being.*

They are married, and eventually separated ; but the girlish grace and charm of Cecily's personality linger on into maturity, while her pure, undivided love for her husband is tenderly recorded in the pages of her diary. Cecily is a more impetuous character than Sidwell Warricombe, whose sheltered, home-keeping life has tended to repress her individuality, and whose motive for ultimately refusing Godwin Peak's offer of marriage is a family, rather than a personal, feeling, as she explains to her friend : “ I cannot act simply as a woman, as a human being. I am bound to a certain sphere of life. The fact that I have outgrown it counts for nothing. I cannot free myself without injury to people whom I love. To act as I wish would be to outrage every rule and prejudice of the society to which I belong.” † That is life ; the ties that make it dear, make it difficult. Sidwell does not “ agonize ” like Emily Hood ; her sacrifice is quietly offered, and does not, apparently, disturb the even tenor of her days, but there is an inevitableness about it all which is a tribute to Gissing's art. If one wished to elaborate his views of philosophical necessity, Sidwell Warricombe,

* *The Emancipated*, p. 152. † *Born in Exile*, p. 530.

conditioned as she is at every turn by her parentage, education, and social standing, would serve very well as a text.

When Gissing devotes his power to the delineation of more complex characters, such as Marion Yule in *New Grub Street*, a girl whose affections and whose intellect are equally responsive, or Beatrice Redwing in *A Life's Morning*, whose warring moods of asceticism and artistic ambition are for the moment harmonized in an act of quixotic devotion, he shows greater penetration, perhaps, than that which allowed Amy Reardon scarcely a redeeming feature. Yet she, a woman practically devoid of generous impulse, is one of Gissing's most impressive creations. The description of her appearance is unusually precise, and foreshadows the subsequent development of her character.

The hue of her hair was ruddy gold; loosely arranged tresses made a superb crown to the beauty of her small, refined head. Yet the face was not of distinctly feminine type; with short hair and appropriate clothing she would have passed unquestioned as a handsome boy of seventeen, a spirited boy, too, and one much in the habit of giving orders to inferiors. Her nose would have been perfect but for ever so slight a crook, which made it preferable to view her in full face than in profile; her lips curved sharply out, and when she straightened them of a sudden the effect was not reassuring to anyone who had counted upon her for facile humour.*

When her husband's resources are at a low ebb, morally, intellectually, and financially, she leaves him and goes back to her mother. Reardon struggles on in

* *New Grub Street*, pp. 40-41.

poverty and obscurity ; once a gleam of hope brightens the horizon ; he is offered a permanent secretaryship and hastens to tell her of his improved prospect. The account of this interview between husband and wife is one of Gissing's subtlest pieces of writing. The shock of the husband's shabby-genteel appearance to his fastidious wife ; the effect of the wife's elegance on the hardly-driven husband, are well brought out. " Both had come to this meeting prepared for a renewal of amity, but in these first few moments each was so disagreeably impressed by the look and language of the other that a revulsion of feeling undid all the more hopeful effects of their long severance." * To coldness succeeds exasperation ; they quarrel, and Amy for the first time hears a few salutary home-truths from the husband who had idolized her :

" Your friends," he exclaimed bitterly. " But for those friends of yours this would never have happened. I wish you had been alone in the world, and penniless."

" A kind wish, all things considered."

" Yes, it *is* a kind wish. Then your marriage with me would have been binding ; you would have known that my lot was yours, and the knowledge would have helped your weakness. . . . You have been allowed to act with independence, and the result is that you have ruined my life and debased your own. . . ."

" You think it was my duty to share such a home as you have at present ? "

" You know it was. And if the choice had lain between that and earning your own livelihood you would have thought that even such a poor home might be tolerable. There were possibilities in you of better things than will ever come out now." †

* *New Grub Street*, p. 313. † *Ibid.*, pp. 315-319.

Throughout the interview the reader's sympathies are enlisted on behalf of Reardon. Amy is incapable of suffering much ; she is "shallow-hearted" ; like Lucretia del Sarto, she is a failure as an artist's wife ; her love is given elsewhere. The involuntary exclamation rises to one's lips, in reviewing her conduct : "So young and so untender !" Her husband leaves her in sorrow and in anger, saying, "I shall never ask you to come. . . . If our married life is ever to begin again it must be of your seeking. Come to me of your own will and I shall never reject you. But I will die in utter loneliness rather than ask you again." *

Their next meeting is over the death-bed of their child, when mutual tenderness springs up once more, to outlast Reardon's death within a week of their re-union. His widow marries a successful journalist, Reardon's one-time friend. It is an old story :

Is my friend hearty,
 Now I am thin and pine,
 And has he found to sleep in
 A better bed than mine ?
 Yes, lad, I lie easy,
 I lie as lads would choose ;
 I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
 Never ask me whose.†

There are surprisingly few middle-aged or elderly women in Gissing's world ; only in *The Odd Women* does he adequately recognize that minor tragedy of the unprofessional woman's life, the unequal struggle with

* *New Grub Street*, pp. 315-319.

† *A Shropshire Lad*, A. E. Housman.

Time. It is an extraordinarily depressing book, quite the gloomiest he ever wrote. Dr. Madden's unfortunate daughters are the "odd women" of the title: the eldest, a timid, inefficient, kindly governess for ever "at rest," yet vaguely, pathetically hopeful; Virginia Madden gains an elusive respite from the pressure of circumstances by indulging a habit of secret drinking; Monica Madden, whose futile prettiness attracts an undesirable husband and an untrustworthy lover, comes to a tragic end—all are deplorably true to life. Gissing's best portrait of an old woman is that of Richard Mutimer's mother in *Demos*. Born and bred in poverty, she cannot accustom herself to plenty, and passes her days in a pathetic endeavour to piece the new life on to the old.

Most of her time Mrs. Mutimer still spent in the kitchen. She had resolutely refused to keep more than one servant, and everything that servant did she herself performed over again, even to the making of beds . . . she was never really at peace, save when she anticipated the servant in rising early and had an honest scrub at saucepans or fire-irons before breakfast.

Of the other mature women whom Gissing presents, Mrs. Ormonde in *Thyrza*, and Mrs. Lessingham in *The Emancipated*, are both unintelligent and unconvincing. He is particularly happy in ironical thumb-nail sketches of humanity; an odd line of humour and pathos and a character stands revealed, *e.g.*, Mrs. Yule "with her familiar expression of mental effort," and Mrs. Poppleton, "who could follow nothing but the very macadam of conversation."

Few of Gissing's later characters demand comment;

they are lineal descendants, for the most part, of his first creations. Alma Fotheringham in *The Whirlpool* recaptures the mood of Gissing's earlier idealization of women ; it is a subtle story demanding repeated readings before it yields its full flavour, and important from a biographical point of view as registering new influences in the writer's life, an awakened love of music, and a tender, paternal emotion. Hitherto there had been few children in Gissing's books—no manly, chivalrous boys like Meredith's Crossjay, no restless, turbulent girls like Maggie Tulliver. The omission was significant and shows the isolation of Gissing's earlier life and work. Late, but not too late in life, he was knitted into the social fabric, so that the more universal human experiences are reflected in his later novels.

Chapter IV

George Gissing as a Man of Letters

GISSING approached even the study of humanity from a literary standpoint. He knew a few types of people intimately, but his actual knowledge of the world was somewhat limited, though he gained from his reading a vicarious experience of life which, to some extent, supplied this deficiency.

His love of letters was one of the few things which reconciled him to life in the metropolis. He liked to wander about literary London peopling it with the creatures of memory and imagination. Even amidst the wretchedness and squalor of *The Nether World* the mention of St. John's Arch, Clerkenwell, starts a literary reminiscence :

In the rooms above the gateway dwelt, a hundred and fifty years ago, one Edward Cave, publisher of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, and there many a time has sat a journeyman author of his, by name Samuel Johnson, too often *impransus*. There it was that the said Samuel once had his dinner handed to him behind a screen, because of his unpresentable costume, when Cave was entertaining an aristocratic guest. In the course of the meal the guest happened to speak with interest of something he had recently read by an obscure Mr. Johnson ; whereat there was joy behind the screen, and probably increased appreciation of the unwonted dinner.*

Constantly, but not obtrusively, "literary" in his expression, Gissing is yet sparing of quotation, preferring the subtler grace of allusion—indeed, his thoughts seem naturally to shape themselves into familiar phrases : "I

* *The Nether World*, p. 51.

can fleet the time not unpleasantly even without help of books." * Names such as "Godwin" Peak and "Piers" Otway suggest a bookish habit of mind, a suggestion which is confirmed when an Italian character in *The Crown of Life* is called by the uncommon surname Florio, probably a reminiscence of the translator of Montaigne.†

Gissing is particularly happy in throwing a side-light on character by a literary allusion. Thus Godwin Peak, waiting in the theatre queue, tries to console himself with the reflection that he is in the spiritual company of Charles Lamb. Lord Dymchurch, whose aim in life it is to attain "a wise passivity," studies Wordsworth and aspires to write verse on the model of Matthew Arnold. The quality of Mr. Widdowson's mind may be gauged by the fact that, deserted by his young wife, he devotes himself to the serious study of Hallam and Adam Smith. The effect of some particular course of reading on the emotions and character of the reader is frequently discussed in such a way as to become valuable literary criticism. The delightful account of Hughie Rolfe's story-hour furnishes a case in point :

Polyphemus was a doubtful experiment. Hughie dreamt of him. Great caution, too, was needful in the matter of pathos. On hearing for the first time Andersen's tale of the Little Tin Soldier, Hughie burst into tears and could scarce be comforted. Grimm was safer : it seemed doubtful whether Andersen was really a child's book at all—every page touched with the tears of things, every line melodious with sadness.‡

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 165.

† Though there is a shop-sign with that name on it, close to the British Museum, opposite the end of Bury Street.

‡ *The Whirlpool*, p. 385.

Maud Enderby, the ascetic, conscience-driven girl in *The Unclassed*, finds cessation from conflict in the momentary acceptance of Rossetti's faith in the identity of Truth, Love, and Beauty. The poems

entranced her, and the rapturous purity of ideal passion, the mystic delicacies of emotion, which made every verse gleam like a star, held her for the time high above that gloomy cloudland of her being, rife with weird shapes and muffled voices. That Beauty is solace of life, and Love the end of being—this faith she would cling to in spite of all; she grasped it with the desperate force of one who dreaded lest it should fade and fall from her. Beauty alone would not suffice; too often it was perceived as a mere mask, veiling horrors; but in the passion and the worship of love was surely a never-failing fountain of growth and power; this the draught that would leave no bitter after-taste, its enjoyment the final and all-sufficient answer to the riddle of life. Rossetti put into utterance for her so much that she had not dared to entrust even to the voice of thought. Her spirit and flesh became one and indivisible; the old antagonism seemed at an end for ever.*

It is interesting to note the range of Gissing's reading as indicated by reference and citation. Shakespeare he loved and appreciated greatly, rejoicing that it had been his fortune to be born where he could read the great dramatist in his own tongue.† With Shelley, he feels "the burthen of the curse of Babel"; like Shelley, he realized the futility of casting "a violet into a crucible that you

* *The Unclassed*, p. 217. Cf. Rossetti, *The House of Life*, v, xvii *et passim*; also *Love Lily*.

† Of the other Elizabethans he seems to have preferred Sidney, Marlowe, and Webster.

might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour," equalled only by the folly which seeks "to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet." * The passage in which he declares his joy in Shakespeare is, by implication, a valuable contribution to the criticism of translation :

Among the many reasons which make me glad to have been born in England one of the first is that I read Shakespeare in my mother-tongue. If I try to imagine myself as one who cannot know him face to face, who hears him only speaking from afar, and that in accents which only through the labouring intelligence can touch the living soul, there comes upon me a sense of chill discouragement, of dreary deprivation. I am wont to think that I can read Homer, and, assuredly, if any man enjoys him, it is I ; but can I for a moment dream that Homer yields me all his music, that his word is to me as to him who walked by the Hellenic shore when Hellas lived ? I know that there reaches me across the vast of time no more than a faint and broken echo ; I know that it would be fainter still but for its blending with those memories of youth which are as a glimmer of the world's primeval glory. Let every land have joy of its poet ; for the poet is the land itself, all its greatness and its sweetness, all that incommunicable heritage for which men live and die. As I close the book, love and reverence possess me. Whether does my heart turn—to the great Enchanter, or to the Island upon which he has laid his spell ? I know not. I cannot think of them apart. In the love and reverence awakened by this voice of voices, Shakespeare and England are but one." †

Alfred Yule's exact but impatient criticism of an article on Elkanah Settle, with references to Crowne and

* *A Defence of Poetry*. † *Ryecroft Papers*, pp. 152-153.

a partial rehabilitation of Shadwell, would seem to indicate considerable familiarity with Restoration drama, dating probably from Dr. (now Sir Adolphus) Ward's lectures in his Owens College days. But Gissing rarely applies his technical knowledge of drama to his own work. It has been objected again and again that his novels are lacking in dramatic situations. He probably intended them to be so ; it is part of his conception of life that tragedy is almost wholly psychological and does not necessarily find issue in action, except in people of heroic mould. This point we shall have occasion to consider later in discussing his criticism of the novel as a form of art.

Gray and Collins please his eclectic and fastidious taste in poetry : "Pope notwithstanding, there came the *Ode to Evening* and that *Elegy* which, unsurpassed for beauty of thought and nobility of utterance in all the treasury of our lyrics, remains perhaps the most essentially English poem ever written." * The grace and melody of Tennyson's verse, his precision of diction, and the success with which he imprisons the spirit of the antique in his poems are fully appreciated by Gissing.† Browning, too, finds occasional echoes in his novels.‡ *The Statue and the Bust* was one of his favourite poems ; it is easy to understand the appeal of its "frustrate ghosts" to a writer so continually preoccupied with what Hardy calls "The unfulfilled intention in life." Gissing's admiration

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 163.

† Tennyson is often quoted : e.g. *Thyrza*, p. 439 ; *New Grub Street*, p. 22 ; *The Odd Women*, pp. 3-6 ; *Letters to Edward Clodd*, No. 4.

‡ *Born in Exile*, p. 163.

for Walt Whitman is a little unexpected. It is an attraction of opposites. The strong, breezy American poet, with his vigorous and varied life, his love of humanity, and his gospel of health and nature, presents a strong contrast to the English novelist. Gissing puts his criticism of Whitman into a letter written by Walter Egremont from America; the tone of the opening sentence is enough to convince the reader that he has before him the writer's own sentiments :

You know how cautiously I have proceeded with this American *vates*. At first I found so much to repel me, yet from the first also I was conscious of a new music, and then the clamour of the vulgar against the man was quite enough to oblige me to give him careful attention. If one goes on the assumption that the ill-word of the mob is equivalent to high praise, one will not, as a rule, be far wrong in matters of literature. . . . He knows the truth of the life that is in all things. From joy in a railway train—"the laughing locomotive! To push with resistless way and speed off in the distance"—to joy in fields and hillsides, joy in "the dropping of raindrops in a song," joy in the fighter's strength, joy in the life of the fisherman, in every form of active being. . . . And so pure is the soul in him, so mighty, so tender, so infinitely sympathetic, that it may stand for Humanity itself. . . . I believe that he for the first time has spoken with the very voice of nature; forests and seas sing to us through him, and through him the healthy, unconscious man, "the average man," utters what before he had no voice to tell of, his secret aspirations, his mute love and praise.*

Ten years separated Gissing's opinion of Whitman from his very one-sided pronouncement upon Kipling. The blatancy which he overlooks in the one case is

* *Thyrza*, pp. 423-424.

vigorously denounced in the other. One feels that Gissing would gleefully have accepted Mr. Robert Lynd's definition of Kipling as "The Poet of Life with a Capital Hell." * Gissing would not have hesitated to call Kipling's Imperialism by a handier name, yet he is grudgingly constrained to admit his power :

Here's the strong man made articulate. It's no use: he stamps down one's prejudice—what? It's the voice of reaction. Millions of men—natural men—revolting against the softness and sweetness of civilization; men all over the world; hardly knowing what they want and what they don't want; and here comes one who speaks for them—speaks with a vengeance. . . . But . . . the brute savagery of it! The very lingo—how appropriate it is! The tongue of Whitechapel blaring lust of life in the track of English guns! He knows it; the man is a great artist; he smiles at the voice of his genius. . . . We may reasonably hope, old man, to see our boys blown into small bits by the explosive that hasn't got its name yet.†

Gissing usually kept to the beaten tracks in his prose reading; the seventeenth-century masters, with Gibbon, Landor, and Carlyle, seem specially to have attracted him. A passing reference to Palgrave's *Arabia* and Layard's *Early Travels* ‡ shows that he occasionally turned aside into one of the most delightful by-paths of literature. He shared Charles Lamb's distaste for "the books which are no books—*biblia-a-biblia*," amongst which he reckoned

* In *Old and New Masters*.

† The sad commentary on all this is that Gissing's elder son, Walter, was killed on the Somme in 1916.

‡ *Will Warburton*, p. 87. For Palgrave and Layard see *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. xiv, ch. 7.

not "Court Calendars, Directories . . . Draught Boards, bound and lettered at the back," * but "essays on bimetallism and treatises against vaccination."

The youthful reading of Carlyle probably strengthened Gissing's aversion to science; † mature reflection upon his teaching led to a comparison between Nietzsche's glorification of power and Carlyle's theory of the strong man. ‡ Reminiscences of *Sartor Resartus* inspired an amusing disquisition on the neckwear of the masses :

In the social classification of the nether world—a subject which so eminently adapts itself to the sportive and gracefully picturesque mode of treatment—it will be convenient to distinguish broadly, and with reference to males alone, the two great sections of those who do, and those who do not, wear collars. Each of these orders would, it is obvious, offer much scope to an analyst delighting in subtle gradation. Taking the collarless, how shrewdly might one discriminate between the many kinds of neckwear which our climate renders necessary as a substitute for the nobler article of attire! The navvy, the scaffolder, the costermonger, the cab-tout—innumerable would be the varieties of texture, of fold, of knot observed in the ranks of unskilled labour. And among those whose higher station is indicated by the linen or paper symbol, what a gap between the mechanic with collar attached to a flannel shirt, and just visible along the top of a black tie, and the shopman whose pride it is to adorn himself with the very ugliest neck-encloser put in vogue by aristocratic sanc-

* "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading" (*Last Essays of Elia*).

† *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 268.

‡ *Our Friend the Charlatan*, pp. 235–236 (Chapman and Hall, 1901).

tion! For such attractive disquisition I have, unfortunately, no space; it must suffice that I indicate the two genera.*

Gissing was not insular in his reading. From time to time in protesting against the convention he is forced to observe, which makes the novel almost of necessity a love-story, he refers to the practice of the Continent: "Nothing but love, love, love; what silly nonsense it is! Why don't people write about the really important things of life? Some of the French novelists do; several of Balzac's, for instance. I have just been reading his *Cousin Pons*—a terrible book, but I enjoyed it ever so much because it was nothing like a love-story. What rubbish is printed about love!"† It has been suggested that at one time Gissing entertained the idea of writing a *Comédie Humaine*—a survey of the whole of English society. The late Lieut. W. T. Young finds in some of his titles a warrant for the suggestion.‡ The task would have been beyond his powers, for he lacked the creative energy and relentlessness of the great Frenchman; he knew too little of life to portray the vigour and bustle of affairs; his genius was receptive rather than creative; his contempt for humanity was tinged with pity rather than salted with humour. In temper he more nearly resembles the early Daudet, though he lacks the young Frenchman's buoyancy. Lieutenant Young works out in considerable detail Gissing's points of contact with the French "naturalist writers."

* *The Nether World*, p. 69. † *New Grub Street*, p. 326.

‡ *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. xiii, ch. 14. Paul Elmer More seems also to build on this assumption in the *Shelburne Essays*, vol. v.

There are points of resemblance, rather than of contact, with the circle of *Soirées de Médan*. Gissing surveyed his world closely, but he is not "documented" like the brothers de Goncourt: he does not attain the controlled objectivity of his contemporary de Maupassant, though it is evident that, by Gissing's time, the question of the intervention of the artist in his work has become, what it was not to Dickens and Thackeray, an artistic problem. Gissing is like Zola in his portrayal of the submerged part of the population of towns and of the squalidness of poverty; . . . a traceable link with all these writers is found in the thought of Schopenhauer, which leavened the whole mass of realistic fiction.*

Gissing was probably drawn to the study of the Russian novel through his familiarity with French literature. Turgenev was a sort of honorary member of the de Goncourt coterie, while his works and those of Dostoievsky appeared in French translations earlier than in English. Gissing was one of the first English novelists to show any interest in Russia, at a time when most Englishmen shared Frau Lenore's misconception of her: "eternal snow, everyone going about in furs, and all military men, but the greatest hospitality and all the peasants very submissive."† The truthfulness and lyrical beauty of Turgenev's stories delighted him, while the economy of his simple, direct characterization and the effectiveness of his subtleties and reserves influenced him strongly. The sombreness of Dostoievsky may have helped to deepen his despondency by the shadow of a shade. Reminiscences of his Russian reading are woven into *The Crown of Life*.

* *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. xiii, ch. 14.

† *Torrents of Spring*, p. 19 (Heinemann, 1915).

He sends his hero to Russia full of the intention to establish a better understanding between that country and our own.

He hoped to know it very well, and, perhaps, to impart his knowledge of it to others. Not many Englishmen mastered the language, or, indeed, knew anything of it ; that huge empire was a mere blank to be filled up by the imaginings of prejudice and hostility. Was it not a task worth setting before oneself, worth pursuing for a life-time, that of trying to make known to English folk their bugbear of the East ? *

In the social life of Russia two things greatly impress Piers Otway : the abolition of capital punishment, and the beliefs of the sect called the Dukhobortsy. Probably both are literary memories. Dostoievsky is continually pre-occupied with the horrors of capital punishment,† while the Dukhobortsy owed their very survival to Tolstoy, who wrote *Resurrection* expressly for their deliverance from poverty and persecution. Piers Otway's friend, Korolevitch, is a member of this community, who (like the Quakers) hold the carrying of arms to be a sin, and who were persecuted because of their refusal to perform military service. Speaking with enthusiasm of their views, Piers Otway voices Gissing's own belief :

They uphold the ideal above all necessary to our time. We ought to be rapidly out-growing warfare ; isn't that the obvious next step to civilization ? It seems a common-place that everyone should look to that end, and strive for it. Yet we're going back—there's a military reaction—fighting is glorified by every-

* *The Crown of Life*, p. 95.

† In *The House of the Dead*, and *The Idiot*.

one who has a loud voice, and in no country more than in England. I wish you could hear a Russian friend of mine speak about it—a rich man who has just given up everything to join the Dukhobortsy. I never knew before what religious passion meant. And it seems to me that this is the world's only hope—peace made a religion. The forms don't matter; only let the supreme end be peace. It is what people have talked so much about—the religion of the future.*

There could hardly be a better discipline for the aspiring critic of fiction than to be compelled to write novels himself. Coming to his task well equipped both in theory and practice, Gissing proves no mean critic of the craft he plies. In his *Critical Study of Charles Dickens* (1898), Forster's *Life of Dickens*, which he subsequently abridged, and Dr. (now Sir Adolphus) Ward's *Dickens*, seem to have been his biographical sources. The task of isolating his subject for critical examination has been almost too carefully performed; there is hardly a hint of the genial personality recorded by Dr. Ward. The writers and artists to whom Dickens endeared himself are passed over in silence; we hear nothing of his relations with Douglas Jerrold and Wilkie Collins, with Maclise, Macready, and the Landseers. Again, Gissing seems to read into the character of Dickens some of his own bitter class prejudice: "The landed proprietor of Gadshill could not forget—the great writer could never desire to forget—a miserable childhood imprisoned in the limbo of squalid London; his grudge against this memory was in essence a *class* feeling; to the end this personal triumph gratified him, however unconsciously,

* *The Crown of Life*, p. 289.

as the vindication of a social claim." * This is what Gissing would have felt. Dickens belonged to a simpler time, when people took class distinctions for granted. His resentment, as represented by Forster, was personal rather than class feeling, while his sanguine temper was hardly capable of cherishing a grudge throughout long years.

The diatribe against women in the chapter entitled "Women and Children," which will be discussed later, is irrelevant as a criticism of literature and unjust as a criticism of life ; it is simply an interpolation, of sad significance, however, for Gissing's future biographer, whoever he may be. With the exception of this extraordinary and unfortunate outburst, the book is singularly free from extraneous matter ; it is not, like Mr. Chesterton's *Criticisms and Appreciations of Dickens's Works*, a series of essays on the critic himself rather than on the writer criticized, but it may fairly be questioned whether the scheme of Gissing's work exhibits his matter to the best advantage. The criticism of characterization is somewhat needlessly spread over three chapters, with the result that the same characters appear again and again, to be exhibited from different points of view. The facts are all there, accurately if not artistically stated, for, in this book, Gissing seems sparing of beautiful words, "the very light of thought" ; but the facts are not well co-ordinated and the chapters read like the work of a weary writer. They lend colour to the assertion of Mr. Morley Roberts that Gissing found this critical work irksome if not distasteful, an assertion which seems to rest partially on a

* *Charles Dickens*, p. 2.

letter to Mrs. H. G. Wells, written while Gissing was engaged upon the book in question : " I have made a good beginning with my critical book and long to have done with it, for, of course, it is an alien subject."* A letter to Mr. Edward Clodd mentioning a review of the newly-published study of Dickens contains further confirmation of this opinion : " Thackeray ? I suppose Long suggests a companion volume ? Blackies did the same, and I declined—simply because I could not afford to work for six months or more for the very trifling payment they suggested. I should *like* to try my hand at Thackeray, who—be it said between us—appeals to me much more strongly than Dickens."† Still, the casual opinions of a moody man in his letters must be weighed against his deliberate pronouncement in the Preface to the 1902 edition of the *Critical Study* : " Not willingly have I foregone any care which might render these pages less unworthy of their subject."

Gissing begins his study of Dickens with an account of the growing power of the " Great Middle Class." For once he is moved to praise these latter days as he reviews the earlier inefficiency of Poor Law Administration, the indifference to child-labour, the brutal delight in hanging, and the prevalence of drinking. Despite its material prosperity, he justly describes the age of Dickens's youth as : " A time of ugliness—ugly religion ; ugly laws ; ugly relations between rich and poor ; ugly clothes, and ugly furniture." With characteristic insistence on the value of learning he touches on the deficiencies of the

* *Private Life of Henry Maitland*, p. 207.

† *Memories*, p. 170.

great novelist's education. Even after making ample allowance for the vocational value of his self-selected reading as a boy Gissing sums up the matter thus: "Few really great men had so narrow an intellectual scope." It was Hobbes who was "wont to say that if he had read as much as other men he should have known no more." A more regular education might have provided Dickens with a refuge from life's difficulties—"a city of the mind"—but it is more than questionable whether it would have enriched his native endowment as a novelist.

It is curious to remark that two of the three great novelists to whom Gissing pays homage, Dickens and Dostoievsky, were deficient in constructive ability. Gissing traces the gradual mastery which Dickens acquires over form, from the early chaotic framework of the *Sketches* and *Pickwick* to the more coherent and artistic plot of *Great Expectations*. In extenuation of the master's deficiencies he urges the fact of serial publication, which invites alteration of scheme and encourages repetition of detail. A more valid reason is foreshadowed by a sentence in *New Grub Street*: "Fiction hasn't yet outgrown the influence of the stage on which it originated." * Dickens had a strong histrionic bias: "He planned a narrative as though plotting for the stage. . . . At the first demand for an 'effect,' gas and limelight are both turned on." In illustration of this unfortunate habit Gissing instances the grand finale of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Critics are divided as to the quality of the plot in *Edwin Drood*. Mr.

* The novel and the drama are still closely allied in the work of Barrie, Bennett, Galsworthy, Walpole, Zangwill.

Chesterton calls it the one good plot Dickens ever contrived. So it is, as far as it goes. Gissing, who probably knew Dickens better than most of his critics, declares that he would have betrayed his old inability to unravel the mystery with skill.

As a critic Gissing brings the right sort of curiosity to his task. Impatiently sweeping aside the judgements of "young writers whose zeal outruns their discretion and far outstrips their knowledge," and who condemn Dickens for his moral purpose and for his happy endings, he asks in effect : "What did Dickens set out to do in story-telling ?" and "How far was he successful ?" Each age has its own literary conventions ; to judge a novelist of one period by the laws of another is to fall into the old Neo-Classical error. Gissing very happily shows how Dickens sought, and not unworthily, to establish complete sympathy between himself and his readers, and that this aim, in itself, was sufficient to prevent his becoming a realist, as we now understand the term : "To write a novel in a spirit of antagonism to all but a very few of his countrymen would have seemed to him a sort of practical bull ; is it not the law of novel-writing, first and foremost, that one shall aim at pleasing as many people as possible ?" * This avowed aim accounts equally for the deliberate limitation of his field ; for his constant softening of the disagreeable, and for the naïve poetic justice of his concluding chapters. Usually, as Gissing argues, he unites idealism with veracity, but the critic does right to censure the false idealism which creates such

* *Charles Dickens*, p. 75.

a character as Alice Marlow, in *Dombey and Son*, a girl who typifies

the combination of base origin and squalid life with striking mental power strikingly developed. This kind of thing is permissible to no artist who deals with the actual world. Using a phrase germane to our subject, it is morally mischievous. Many a novelist has sinned in this direction ; above all, young authors misled by motives alien to art, who delight in idealizing girls of the low, or lowest, class.*

Taine finds in Dickens a lack of sublimity, but the criticism is beside the mark ; we rarely find humour and sublimity together. He charges Dickens with exaggeration, and Gissing meets with explanations and extenuations a charge which cannot flatly be denied. In the first place, he puts the unreality of Dickens's characters down to the dramatic conduct of the plot. Mr. Peggotty, for example, is a quite credible and lovable character so long as he remains a rugged Yarmouth sailor, but, as Gissing points out, we lose faith in him when, as the uncle of melodrama, he sets out to search for his niece "over the highways and by-ways of Europe." In the second place, he seeks to show that, whatever the seeming exaggeration, characters such as Pecksniff, Uriah Heep, Mr. Squeers, Mr. Mantalini, and even Mr. Micawber, are consistent with themselves, and, therefore, from an artistic standpoint unassailable. He further insists that the age to which Dickens belonged was unaccustomed to subtleties and reserves ; it demanded emphasis and reiteration, in literature as in politics, and in Dickens it got them. In the third place, and in a

* *Charles Dickens*, p. 87.

criticism of Mrs. Gamp, to which Mr. Chesterton has offered the sincerest tribute of flattery,* Gissing shows that the novelist gets many of his effects of character by selection rather than by exaggeration, "by dint of omitting those very features which in life most strongly impress us."

This appreciation of Mrs. Gamp is one of the best things in the book.

The Mrs. Gamp of our novel is a piece of sublime idealism. It is a sublimation of the essence of Gamp. No novelist (say what he will) ever gave us a picture of life which was not idealized; but there are degrees—degrees of purpose and of power. Juliet's Nurse is an idealized portrait, but it comes much nearer to the real thing than Mrs. Gamp: in our middle-class England we cannot altogether away with the free-spoken dame of Verona; we Bowdlerize her—of course, damaging her in the process. Mrs. Berry, in *Richard Feverel*, is idealized, but she smacks too strongly of the truth for boudoir readers. Why, Moll Flanders herself is touched and softened, for all the author's illusive directness! In Mrs. Gamp, Dickens has done his own Bowdlerizing, but with a dexterity which serves only to heighten his figure's effectiveness. Vulgarity he leaves—that is of the essence of the matter; vulgarity unsurpassable is the note of Mrs. Gamp. Vileness, on the other hand, becomes grotesqueness, wonderfully converted into a subject for laughter. Her speech, among the basest ever heard from human tongue, by a process of infinite subtlety which leaves it the same yet not the same, is made an endless amusement—a source of quotation for laughing lips incapable of unclean utterance. . . . We can form some notion of what Mrs. Gamp would have become in the hands of a rigorous realist with scorn and disgust taking the place of humour.

* *Criticisms and Appreciations, etc.*, p. 22.

We reject the photograph : it avails us nothing in art or life. Humour deals gently with fact and fate : in its smile there is forbearance, in its laugh there is kindliness. With falsehood—however well meant—it is incompatible ; when it has done its work as solvent the gross adherents are dissipated, the essential truth remains. Do you ask for the Platonic *idea* of London's hired nurse early in Queen Victoria's reign ? Dickens shows it you embodied. . . . The class it represents shall be got rid of as speedily as possible ; well and good—we cannot tolerate such a public nuisance. But the type shall be preserved for all time by the magic of a great writer's deep-seeing humour, and shall be known as Mrs. Gamp.*

Gissing's idealism seems for the nonce to have deserted him when he wrote the early part of the chapter on "Women and Children" ; we do not agree with him when he says : "To-day the women must be very few who by deliberate choice open a volume of his works," or when he declares : "The humorist never strongly appeals to that audience." Gissing's own deficiency in humour makes him take Dickens's women far too seriously ; we do not think that the tearful Mrs. Gummidge with her constant plaint, "I'm a lone, lorn creature, and everything goes contrary with me," is at all aptly described as "a monument of selfish misery." Dickens surely meant her to be amusing, and comment such as this : "The vice of querulousness is one of the most intolerable beheld by the sun" is valueless because irrelevant. Poor Mrs. Nickleby may have been "born with the intellectual equipment of a Somerset ewe," but the artless wiles of Dolly Varden and Bella Wilfer hardly deserve censure. The bitterness

* *Charles Dickens*, pp. 103-106.

vanishes when Gissing passes on to consider the children ; the artistic value of the character of little Nell is, one feels, justly estimated in the following passage, true art being always capable of symbolic interpretation : " As for the heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, distaste for her as a pathetic figure seems to me unintelligent. She is a child of romance ; her death is purely symbolical, signifying the premature close of any sweet, innocent, and delicate life."*

The most valuable of the later chapters is that in which Gissing compares Dickens with his Continental contemporaries—Balzac, Victor Hugo, Dostoievsky, and Daudet. The vexed question of " realism " was sure to lurk upon the very threshold of any such attempt, and Gissing does not shirk it. In a few words he indicates the fundamental differences of attitude between Dickens and his brothers in art :

Novels such as those of Balzac are said to be remorseless studies of actual life ; whereas Dickens, it is plain, never pretends to give us life itself, but a selection—an adaptation. Balzac, calling his work " the human comedy," is supposed to have smiled over this revelation of the littleness of man, his frequent sordidness, his not uncommon bestiality. Dostoievsky, absorbed in compassionate study of the wretched, the desolate, the oppressed, by no means goes out of his way to spare our feelings ; a Daudet, so like to Dickens in one or two aspects, matures into a conception of the novel which would have been intolerable to the author of *David Copperfield*, cultivates a frankness regarding the physical side of life which in England would probably have to be defended before legal authorities with an insular conception of art.†

Gissing knew from experience the sheer impossibility of

* *Charles Dickens*, p. 211.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262.

representing actual life in terms of literature. Hasty reviews in which he himself had been classed and dismissed as a realist doubtless played their part in helping to crystallize his critical creed, which, though less whimsical, has a flavour of Lamb's defence of the Artificial Comedy,* and should one day rank as a *locus classicus* in the criticism of the novel :

As soon as a writer sits down to construct a narrative, to imagine human beings or adapt those he knows to changed circumstances, he enters a world distinct from the actual, and, call himself what he may, he obeys certain laws, certain conventions, without which the art of fiction could not exist. Be he a true artist, he gives us pictures which represent his own favourite way of looking at life : each is the world in little, and the world as *he* prefers it. So that, whereas execution may be rightly criticized from the common point of view, a master's general conception of the human tragedy or comedy must be accepted as that without which his work could not take form. Dickens has just as much right to his optimism in the world of art as Balzac to his bitter smile. Moreover, if it comes to invidious comparisons one may safely take it for granted that "realism" in its aggressive shapes is very far from being purely a matter of art. The writer who shows us all the sores of humanity, and does so with a certain fury of determination, may think he is doing it for art's sake ; but in very truth he is enjoying an attack upon the order of the universe—always such a tempting form of sport.†

* *Essays of Elia*, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century."

† *Charles Dickens*, pp. 262-263. This passage should be borne in mind in reading unfavourable reviews of Gissing's work, such as that in the *National Review*, November 1904, on "Gissing as the Spokesman of Despair"; and in the *Nation*, June 11, 1903, on *The Ryecroft Papers*.

“Hard writing makes easy reading.” The ease and grace of Gissing’s style were not attained without sundry wrestlings with intractable words ; the difficulties reflected in the following passage are the author’s own :

Sometimes the three hours’ labour of a morning resulted in half a dozen lines, corrected into illegibility. His brain would not work : he could not recall the simplest synonyms ; intolerable faults of composition drove him mad. He would write a sentence beginning thus : “ She took a book with a look of——” ; or thus, “ A revision of this decision would have made him an object of derision.” Or if the period were otherwise inoffensive, it ran in a rhythmic gallop which was torment to the ear. All this in spite of the fact that his former books had been noticeably good in style. He had an appreciation of shapely prose, which made him scorn himself for the kind of stuff he was now turning out.*

In the words of his favourite, Izaak Walton, his diction was “ choicely good.” He handles words lovingly, careful not to despoil them of their trailing clouds of glory. In reading his work one continually feels the shock of appreciation caused by sheer felicity of phrasing, or by the perfect union of thought and expression, as, for example, where he writes of “ the sweet assurance of a morrow unenslaved,” or where he describes Thyrza’s mother, whose “ eyes have their sad beauty from foresight of death.” The peculiarities of his diction are commonly due to the use of words of classical origin or association. We see the pedant at play as he writes of “ the future *nigritude*” of Sir Job Whitelaw’s statue ;† of the *susurration* which follows the rising of Professor Walsh ;‡ of a

* *New Grub Street*, p. 110. † *Born in Exile*, p. 6.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

tired journalist who *indued* his comfortable jacket ; * of the vulgar *sequaciousness* of women in general. † But there is a greater art in writing than this simple process of substitution, an art in which Gissing follows Flaubert in his search for *le mot propre*. Of his happy discoveries we may quote : “ The *penumbra* of middle-age had touched his countenance.” ‡ On the whole, however, Gissing’s use of Latin derivatives illustrates his precision of thought rather than his pursuit of beauty. No other word would quite so aptly describe Lady Ogram’s *circumspective* mind, § or indicate the quality of Sidney Kirkwood’s *perdurable* love. || A few of his borrowings, in the earlier books, are not so happy : “ The *gracile* loveliness of Cecily’s neck ” ¶ demanded a prettier adjective, while a humorous statement of fact does not demand the heavy artillery of diction which Gissing here brings into play : “ He knew, moreover, that manducation and the absorption of fluids must be performed without audible gusto.” **

Other uncommon words and usages are probably reminiscences of reading ; a few old English derivatives occur in his later and more leisured writing ; the *tettered* bark of the wych-elm ; †† the *murk* confusion of my heart ; ‡‡ the hopeless level of the *swinking* multitude. §§ *Intenerate* suggests Dr. Johnson at prayer ; *sciolist* and *pococurantism* recall Matthew Arnold in a mood of pro-

* *Born in Exile*, p. 130. † *Ibid.*, p. 39.

‡ *The Whirlpool*, p. 3.

§ *Our Friend the Charlatan*, p. 100.

|| *The Nether World*, p. 277. ¶ *The Emancipated*, p. 158.

** *Demos*, p. 89. †† *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 10.

‡‡ *Ibid.*, p. 83. §§ *Our Friend the Charlatan*, p. 109.

test ; academic usage furnishes a *lustrum* of quiet contentment. Gissing owed practically nothing to contemporary science and invention, which have left their mark on the diction of most modern writers. *Camouflage*, by the way, would not have "intrigued" him. Once only does he appropriate a specifically scientific term, which he uses to some purpose in describing the attitude of the clergy to modern thought :

"Many wilfully shut their eyes to the truth."

"No, they don't shut their eyes!" cried Godwin. "They merely lower a *nictitating membrane* which permits them to gaze at light without feeling its full impact." *

"Le style, c'est l'homme même." Gissing's character comes out in his deprecatory habit of phrasing, as if he constantly feared to overstate his case and wished to disarm criticism. He is deficient in self-assertion. This trait is, naturally, most marked in his autobiographical writings. One can hardly turn the pages of *The Ryecroft Papers* without noting phrase after phrase of this kind : "I am no cosmopolite," "I am no botanist," "I am no friend of the people." To describe by negations is the habit of a timid mind. The frequent aspiration of Gissing's heroes is for "not inadequate leisure" to possess their souls in quiet amongst their beloved books, "a not ignoble ambition."

His fondness for Gibbon may account for the frequency of concise, antithetical clauses in his earlier work. In *The Unclassed* he writes of an influence "which led to secret intimacy and open disaster." The echo of Gibbon becomes fainter as antithesis develops into epigram, and

* *Born in Exile*, p. 148.

the description of Miriam Baske, in *The Emancipated*, is almost in the manner of George Eliot : "her attire of subdued mourning indicated widowhood already at the stage when it is permitted to make quiet suggestion of freedom rather than distressful reference to loss." His earlier work, moreover, is occasionally brightened by a felicity of poetic phrase which he never surpassed : "the flowers on the table were like a careless gift of gold-hearted, prodigal summer" (*Demos*). "There are women who enter a room like the first notes of a sonata and leave it like the sweet close of a nocturne. Isabel was of them" (*Isabel Clarendon*). His later books are characterized rather by incisive epigram, *e.g.*, "Marriage is, like life itself, easiest to those who think least about it" (*The Whirlpool*).

Gissing has a thin vein of literary humour, not very genial, tending rather to harden into irony. It is the humour of words, not of situations. A purist himself, he delights to pounce upon the misuse of words by the uninitiated. With a sense of smiling superiority he comments on the advertisement of steam-boats "*replete with lavatories and a ladies' saloon*," * or draws attention to the report of an artist's "talent as an *exponent* of female beauty."† His purely verbal humour is seen in the naming of such characters as Mrs. Gluck, the boarding-house keeper, and her guest Frau Wohlgemuth, Miss Sparke and Mr. Gammon, and in such titles as *The Unclassed*, a phrase sadly suggestive to academic readers ! Possibly Gissing regarded his facility in this direction with disdain. His puns are always made by his less distinguished

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 118. † *Will Warburton*, p. 134.

characters. Humour, indeed, is not an integral part of his nature.

The most valuable influence in forming his style was his love of the sonorous periods of seventeenth-century prose. Milton and Jeremy Taylor were no strangers to him, though Sir Thomas Browne chimed in best with the cadence of his prevailing mood : " Had existence been to her but one song of thanksgiving, even then to lie thus had been desirable. For to sleep is better than to wake, and how should we who live bear the day's burden but for the promise of death ? " * He resembles W. J. Cory in the grace and charm of his expression, which reveals a kindred wistfulness, a like aspiration for and achievement of fine scholarship. Practically all the writers he revered were in the classical tradition. He was familiar with De Quincey ; Landor's *Æsop and Rhodope* was one of his favourite readings ; his friend Mr. Morley Roberts speaks of his habit of quoting from memory : " There are no fields of amaranth on this side of the grave ; there are no voices, O Rhodope, that are not soon mute, however tuneful ; there is no name, with whatever emphasis of passionate love repeated, of which the echo is not faint at last. " † Surely that must often have been in Gissing's mind as he wrote.

No confessional writings of Gissing's time, though there were many, can equal *The Ryecroft Papers*, and *By the Ionian Sea* in the subtlety of their style and in the subdued Sabbath radiance of their atmosphere. Gissing himself loved the earlier book, of which he wrote to

* *Ryecroft Papers*, p. 118.

† *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, p. 226.

Mr. Edward Clodd in these words: "An odd thing, not a novel, called *An Author at Grass*, which I have taken two years to write—at intervals—will begin to appear serially in the *Fortnightly*. I shall be disappointed if you do not like it. For it is written for people like you, whom the general uproar of things does not deafen to still small voices." * He was a little disappointed at its reception, and in a later letter to the same correspondent he states, "It will amuse you to hear that all the noise about Ryecroft has hitherto resulted in a total sale . . . not quite 200. Yet I have had nearly threescore letters from strangers about this book, most of them enthusiastic." † When, at length, Gissing's first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, is reprinted it will give readers a sense of unity to find in Edward Norman, incumbent of Bloomfield, a faint outline sketch of the scholarly Ryecroft. Mark Rutherford's *Autobiography* and *Deliverance* have a similar pensive charm, but Mark Rutherford was a Dissenter who studied his Bible and followed John Bright. His prose is, therefore, simpler, though his thought is more profound, while his melancholy has a theological tinge which rarely clouds the limpidity of Gissing's thought.

What, then, is Gissing's note? What is his special contribution to modern prose? It is the note of the scholar whose appeal is primarily to academic people; by choosing and polishing his diction he has, to some extent, limited his public. He cherishes the classical ideals of lucidity and restraint. His influence should avail to foster the love of letters in an unregenerate age. His delightful account of Cassiodorus, for example, awakens a more than moment-

* *Memories*, p. 181. † June 16, 1903.

ary desire to read the *Varia* in the original.* The peculiar grace of his literary and historical allusions is a constant delight. Again and again the man of letters sees more, and suggests more, to the reader than the actual scene before him. He has, indeed, the true note of the *sacer vates* when he writes :

I always turn out of my way to walk through a country churchyard ; these rural resting-places are as attractive to me as a town cemetery is repugnant. I read the names upon the stones, and find a deep solace in thinking that for all these the fret and the fever of life are over. There comes to me no touch of sadness : whether it be a little child or an aged man, I have the same sense of happy accomplishment ; the end having come, and with it the eternal peace, what matter if it come late or soon ? There is no such gratulation as *Hic jacet*. There is no such dignity as that of death. In the path trodden by the noblest of mankind, these have followed ; that which of all who live is the utmost thing demanded, these have achieved. I cannot sorrow for them, but the thought of their vanished life moves me to a brotherly tenderness. The dead, amid this leafy silence, seem to whisper encouragement to him whose fate yet lingers : " As we are, so shalt thou be ; and behold our quiet."†

Somehow one feels a sense of injustice that this more facile if more sympathetic book, the product of a " fugitive

* *By the Ionian Sea*, pp. 173-181.

† Mr. Seccombe singles out this passage for praise, noting Gissing's indebtedness to Raleigh for his " two narrow words," to Webster, and to Sir Thomas Browne (*House of Cobwebs*, Preface, p. xlvii). There is, moreover, in the second sentence an echo of *Macbeth*, iii, 2, 23 : " After life's fitful fever he sleeps well." *Ryecroft Papers*, pp. 183-184.

and cloistered virtue," should achieve the immortal garland before his more strenuous work.* There is really nothing new in it, nothing that Gissing had not said again and again in his novels. Herein lies part of its charm. The expression certainly has Gissing's own particular literary quality which lends grace even to the obvious: "For suffering and sorrow are the great Doctors of Metaphysic." An intense love of England, of English literature, English comfort, English cooking, even of the English Sabbath, pervades the book; the discriminating will value more highly the analysis of English hypocrisy.† Gissing is working in his true medium when he criticizes the theory of the Stoic philosophy,‡ or gives an appreciation of Messieurs de Port-Royal.§ It is a book to be read, early and late, by all who seek to appreciate Gissing's novels, even though it leaves the reader with an impression of frustration and disappointment that the writer should fail to "think through" the problems he raises, preferring to remain in that quiescent state of mind which recalls Matthew Arnold's protest:

Calm's not life's crown, though calm is well—
'Tis all, perhaps, which man acquires,
But 'tis not what our youth desires.

* There have been fourteen editions of *The Ryecroft Papers*, while many of the novels are out of print. A new edition, "re-set," is even now being advertised, February, 1922.

† Pp. 272-278.

‡ Page 184.

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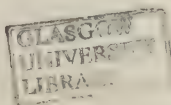
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